

Storying students' ecologies of belonging: a narrative inquiry into the relationship  
between 'first generation' students and the University

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## **Abstract**

This research study explores the ways in which articulations of belonging are expressed by a small number of second year education undergraduates in a post-1992 university in the UK. Issues of student engagement and belonging in Higher Education (HE) have been the subject of research within recent years as a way to enhance rates of student retention and success, as the Widening Participation agenda has realised a changing demographic within the traditional student body. This study focuses on the First Generation Student (FGS), as reflective of the non-traditional student, who is subject to a negative framing within the educational literary discourse. The research adopts a metaphorical lens to locate the FGS as migrant within the HE landscape and to consider HE institutional efforts to foster a sense of belonging, as a strategic tool for success, as a colonising process. Working within an ecological framing of the topic, the study focuses on the differing contexts within which the research participants operate and considers the impact these have upon student engagement with the university. As a way to foreground respectful working with research participants, a person-centred approach has been employed, using a narrative inquiry methodological framework. Voices of the participants, as narrators, are privileged within this study in order to afford them the opportunity to add to the ongoing conversation on belonging. Creative strategies, based upon photo- and metaphor-elicitation, have been employed to facilitate discussion of the abstract and

intangible concept of belonging and to provide a participatory nature to this research study. Findings signal a strong resolve by these narrators to overcome obstacles in their path to success within what is often an unfamiliar terrain within HE. The potentiality of the individual is privileged, showing strengths that are brought to the world of study which are often unrecognised by university practices. The affective dimension of belonging is emphasised within the research and metaphors of belonging, articulated by the narrators, offer alternative conceptual structurings which privilege aspects to do with security and adventure. Such insights afford opportunities to view belonging from differing perspectives, to re-figure ways in which students see themselves within HE processes, and to alert staff and personnel to new ways in which they might view the non-traditional student. Aspects of valuing the diversity of students and of a person-centred approach to working are viewed as key to creating the possibilities for belonging.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction to the Study**

This study developed out of my curiosity in regard to how some undergraduate students manage to sustain their full-time studies in spite of the fact that life often seems to get in the way. As a full-time undergraduate in the 1970s, I entered university without responsibilities to do with family, employed working, or other commitments that would take my attention away from the focus on study.

Working now within a post-1992 university, I am humbled by the logistical gymnastics that many contemporary students have to undertake in order to maintain their progression within their courses; having to jump through academic hoops while parenting young children, travelling over long periods and sometimes also working long hours to pay for tuition fees, which, in England, have spiralled in recent years and seem only likely to increase still further (BBC, 2017).

I wish to begin this introduction with a story about two of my students:

I was shocked and amazed at what my students get up to  
I was making my way across the foyer of the main teaching block  
It was mid-morning and I was about to begin a sequence of two lessons  
Two of my students ambled towards the lift; both looked tired and slightly  
distracted  
Asking them if they were ok, I was informed they had both come off a night shift  
The one, a house husband, as he defined himself; the other, a lone mother  
I couldn't believe they were turning up for two lessons that would take them  
through till late afternoon  
I hadn't realised my students worked at night  
About half an hour before the end of the second lesson, the one said she needed  
to leave  
She was afraid she might fall asleep at the wheel  
And people say that students don't engage



The topic of student engagement within Higher Education (HE) has been the subject of concerted research effort (Chapman, 2003; Kahu, 2013; Krause, 2005; McInnis, 2003; Tinto, 1987; Zepke, 2011, 2014; Zepke and Leach, 2010). While engagement has been found to have strong links with student success (Thomas, 2012; Thomas *et al.*, 2017), it has tended to focus on engagement narrowly as a generic indicator of quality learning and teaching and successful student outcomes (Zepke, 2015). Educational behaviours in the classroom and wider academic spaces are monitored and analysed as a way to measure the engagement of students.

With such a narrow focus upon engagement, I am concerned that the bigger picture is being missed. Expectations held of students, founded upon such an indicator, have the potential to mis-represent student abilities and motivational drives; that is, students may be viewed as having low expectations. This is confounded by the high expectations that students are seen to have in relation to their university experience now that they are having to meet the increased costs of Higher Education (Thomas, 2012). The terminology of 'managing student expectations' (Bryson and Hardy, 2012) has entered into the HE institutional discourse and it would seem rather a quandary; how to lower, or at least temper, expectations that students may have of their experience, since universities are measured on levels of student satisfaction of their experience, while raising perceived low expectations that the students bring with them.

The quandary is an expedient one in the neo-liberal world of market competition but in terms of social justice it appears to distort the picture; student as whole person is seemingly replaced by student as potential economic asset (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars and Francis, 2015). Failure to emphasise the humanity of the student, I would argue, offers a reductive view and infringes democratic rights. I am reminded of the words of Korczak (1967, in Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 2002), a champion of children's rights, who noted that:

We fail to see the child, just as one time we were unable to see the woman, the peasant, the oppressed social strata and oppressed peoples. We have arranged things for ourselves so that children should be in our way as little as possible...A child's primary and irrefutable right is the right to voice his (sic) thoughts, to actively participate in our verdicts concerning him.  
(Korczak (1967, in Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 2002, pp. 69-70)

Similar processes may be at work in universities wishing to control what it is to be a good student; criteria that are both produced and maintained by the university itself (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003), without regard for the complexity of contemporary students' lives and where sensibilities that exist within those spaces between people (Treacher, 2006) can be unwittingly bruised, and ignored. A more holistic view of student engagement is envisaged by Zepke (2015) as a way to broaden the concept to include influences beyond the classroom. Building on the work of Lawson and Lawson (2013), it is argued that a more sociocultural ecological perspective is required in order to encompass wider ecological influences, to do with family and community.

## A person-centred narrative approach

The work of Trowler (2010), in her comprehensive review of literature on student engagement, was influential in determining further my direction of study; firstly, she notes that frameworks for action to improve engagement are “not usually connected to the daily reality of those in HE” (p. 47) and secondly, and in keeping with a democratic perspective, she identifies the lack of student voice: “a striking absence was the student voice in the literature on student engagement. Instead, literature was written about students for managers, policy makers. . .” (p.47).

Conceptualising student engagement without the engagement of students would seem a major omission. More recent research (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Thomas *et al.*, 2017) provides involvement by students in the form of questionnaire completion, focus groups, discussions and peer researchers as ways to enhance the student voice in engagement research. It became evident to me, then, that to satisfy my curiosity as to the “daily reality” of students within HE, I also needed to engage respectfully in a process in which the voices of students could be heard. Based upon a person-centred philosophy, I have sought to privilege the voice of the student in much the same way as Brydon-Miller *et al.* (2011) discuss the need for community members to come together to actively generate knowledge to contribute to issues facing them, for epistemological reasons, as well as for political reasons:

“Knowledge(s) are plural and those systematically excluded from knowledge generation need to be active participants in the research process, especially when it is about them” (p.389).

In contrast to more instrumentalist means of collecting students' views on their engagement with the university, focused on large surveys and questionnaires, and yet acknowledging the more active involvement of students in recent research studies, as noted previously, I chose to follow the ideas of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918/1927, in Chase, 2005, p.653) who, explaining their interest in life records all those years ago noted:

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organisation, but analyse the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence, which it has upon their lives.

(Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918/1927, p.1833, in Chase, 2005, p.653)

The personal lived experiences seemed to offer what I was seeking in regard to knowing what it was to be a student in the here and now. I wanted to understand the wider influences on students' lives and how they might serve to impact the experience of being a student; I wanted to examine to what extent the wider lifeworld of the student impacted their engagement with the university. The need to have such lived experiences articulated by students themselves focused my attention on the methodological framework of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) within which I could create a facilitative 'climate' to offer a person-centred way of working (Rogers, 1990). In my own study, therefore, specific concrete lives have been storied in order to illuminate the more abstract and instrumentalist notions of student engagement: "the stories themselves are a means to understand our subjects better. While stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths, story-telling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanation" (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 32). Listening to individuals' stories rather than suppressing them

(Mishler, 1986) has been used as a way of providing insights into individual lives through the use of narrative as a methodological qualitative approach (Elliott, 2005). Within this study, the use of the terms story and narrative are used interchangeably; it is recognised, however, that the narrative offers a means by which the 'how' of the story construction can be examined (Riessman, 1993).

## Context

As researcher, I became interested in how the student demographic attending Higher Education (HE) within the UK has been subject to change over the past several decades. The Widening Participation (WP) agenda has encouraged more students from under-represented groups to attend (House of Commons Public Affairs Committee, 2009) and this has led to an increase of 42% in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds studying full time for a first degree between 2005 and 2014 (O'Prey, 2015). At a time when universities, certainly those post-1992 universities, are endeavouring to compete with each other for student allegiance, the notion of 'student engagement' has found favour among HE institutions as a way to conceptualise the requirement to maintain high numbers of students. The focus upon retention, attainment and progression of students in order to 'grow' the financial capacities of many post-1992 universities is located within a marketised HE landscape of ever-growing targets (Smith, 2007), wherein the need to minimise attrition rates is paramount. Higher rates of attrition which bring with them loss of institutional revenue and subsequent reduction in statistical measures of success, are, however, associated with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Quinn *et al.*, 2006), and it is

the 'non-traditional' student, recruited within the WP agenda, that is often representative of such backgrounds.

Governmental drives to invest in the national economy, resulting in the massification of HE (Yorke, 2006) within the UK, has led to "new student constituencies" (Burke, 2012, p. 116) manifesting themselves in what has been termed the 'non-traditional' student now in attendance at many of the post-1992 universities. While more traditional universities have seen the WP agenda largely pass them by (Thompson, 2012, p.53), retaining a more homogenised student body (Bryson and Hand, 2008, in Kahu, 2013, p. 766), future moves to hold all providers of HE "including the most selective institutions" (Sellgren, 2017) to account, in terms of publishing data in regard to socio-economic background of students, is foreshadowed by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). The changing demographic heralds a greater diversity of student characteristics but the need, within the concept of student engagement, to retain such students is problematic if the range of characteristics remains unknown and unquestioned. In keeping with Basit and Tomlinson (2012) who argue the necessity of examining the experiences of students once they enter the university and with Zepke and Leach (2010) who adopt the position that the HE institution needs to adapt to its changing demographic, I wished to learn more about the lifeworlds of non-traditional students as a way to explore more fully the issues around student engagement. The concept of lifeworld is initially taken from the work of Husserl (1970) to identify the everyday, social world of intersubjective exchange. I wanted to find out more about these lifeworlds, to see how the differing contexts

of students' lives impacted their engagement with the university. I use the term lifeworld to depict the social context, the day-to-day environment and the lived experiences pertaining to students as a way to foreground the wider ecological influences upon student engagement.

The ability to respond to students' needs and welcome all comers is premised on the university being aware of current ways of being a student and Kahu (2013) would seem to support such a research enquiry: "By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student's engagement, and by embedding these phenomena and processes within the wider socio-cultural context, the unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations self-evident" (p.766). As a way of providing such a particular student population, I have chosen to work with First Generation Students (FGS) within my research study; that is, those who are first in their immediate family to attend HE.

The FGS is representative of the non-traditional student and my choice of such a student population, recruited via the WP agenda, is premised on its potential to afford diversity; that is, FGS encompass the potential to offer a range of social characteristics, to do with age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, health, and economic background. In addition, Thomas and Quinn (2007) identify this student population as being under-researched at this time so that Kahu's (2013) words became ever more salient. Literature on student engagement, in contrast, comprises large bodies of work, drawn mainly from North America and Australasia

over several decades, which centre on student involvement as evaluated by large annual national surveys, with a smaller, but growing, body of literature from the UK which tends to focus more on individual student learning (Trowler, 2010). Importantly, in her review of literature, Trowler (2010) makes visible the often assumed understanding of the term within literature so that measures contained within surveys become “unstated proxies for engagement” (p.17), and a universal definition remains elusive, so compromising institutions’ attempts to enhance engagement; the continued absence of a universal definition of student engagement is noted more recently by Thomas and Jones (2017, p.5). In seeking to offer greater clarity, Zepke and Leach (2010) offer ten proposals for action to enhance student engagement, one of which is: “Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds” (p.169); such a proposal includes feelings of security, belonging, affirmation, and value (p. 172). I am attracted to the work of these authors as they note that:

While student-centred conceptions of engagement do recognise context, require engagement by teachers as well as learners and are nested in the relationships they share, this view is too narrowly focused on operational matters. What is needed is a democratic-critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques or behaviours, a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen. Barnett and Coate (2005) expand this critique by distinguishing between operational engagement and ontological engagement.

(Zepke and Leach, 2010, p.173)

However, while the nature of student engagement continues to undergo change, researchers (Smith, 2007; Zepke, 2014) have sought to problematize its parameters and to question its function within the HE landscape. The quasi-



market engendered by the student as consumer changes the relationship with academic staff, argues Smith (2007), and may also “initiate a recruitment drive of ‘bums on seats’” (p.692). For Zepke (2014), strong links between the need to retain students, inherent within the concept of student engagement, are at the same time seen to serve the needs of a neoliberal political agenda that views education as a commodity, to be produced effectively and then traded in the workplace. In addition, he makes visible the privileging of education as instrumentalist knowledge, performativity, and accountability in contrast to a “more philosophical and political understanding of purposes, knowledge and values in higher education” (Zepke, 2014, p.697). In a recent research study by Oele *et al.* (2017), the authors noted their concerns about how student engagement is being measured as part of a “data-driven curricular development . . . (which) may be detrimental to the ability of faculty to engage in the creative and intellectual risk-taking that is believed to spark a student’s curiosity” (Oele *et al.*, 2017, p.113). I concur with such sentiments; my own curiosity has been dampened by such an emphasis upon the technical and operational processes of implementation of engagement (Zepke, 2014), so that my research study shifted emphasis to focus on the more affective and holistic dimensions of student engagement.

### Ecological framing

I found the conceptual framing of engagement by Case (2007) to be a useful model on which to build. Based on the work of Mann (2001), who uncovers aspects of engagement and alienation within the student body, Case (2007)

reinforces the wider socio-cultural dimension of the topic of student engagement in general; that is, she explores the broader experience of being a student rather than separating cognitive aspects from it. In an empirical study with engineering students in South Africa, Case (2007) frames their engagement within “six possible ‘relationships’ . . . : to ones’ studies; to the broader university life; to home; to the career; to one’s classmates; and to the lecturer” (p. 123) where “engagement can be considered to represent a connection in the context of a relationship which a student desires or expects to belong to” (p. 120). For me, this definition of engagement has been pivotal; drawing on the aspect of ‘context’, I realised a way to incorporate the diversity of student lifeworlds and so shape my research design around the differing contexts, or ecologies, of students and the impact of their lived experiences in relation to the university.

I found that Case’s (2007) framing of engagement was pertinent to my study on a number of levels: i) ‘relationship’ can denote reciprocity, as represented in a two-way process, reflecting my own ethical positioning of the teaching-learning relationship; ii) the desire or expectation of a student assumes a sense of personal power, or agency, which may obviate the imperative to conform to existing practices; indeed, ‘critical engagement’ is viewed by academics as an indicator of success (Trowler, 2010, p. 5); and, iii) the ‘six relationships’ offer a widening context with the potential for multiple connections and multiple influences upon the student’s sense of engagement, so contributing to the design of my research study, drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The perspective of differing contexts within which to locate the student, both within the university lifeworld and beyond, privileges an holistic framing of the student experience, emphasising the unique ecologies of individual students and so providing a means to understand how these might influence the lived experience of being a student in the 'here and now'. Such a concept of engagement reaches beyond the HE classroom and offers possibilities for greater social cohesion and improved life experiences. While definitions of student engagement have often privileged a pedagogically-based focus (Chapman, 2003) in relation to the teaching-learning process in order to enhance outcomes, such as the "time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university" (Krause, 2005, p.3), for me, the construction as ontological engagement (Barnett and Coate, 2005) offers an ethical approach that works towards democratic practices and provides an holistic concept of engagement which benefits not only the student and the institution, but also society at large.

### Belonging

Student engagement has also been popularly couched in terms of student persistence, retention, and graduation levels. Thomas and Quinn (2010) suggest that descriptors such as 'persistence' and 'drop out' suggest an individualistic approach whereas 'retention' and 'graduation levels' offer a more institutionally-based approach, with an emphasis upon what institutions might do to engage students; certainly, this is a viewpoint that would seem to be gathering ground in more recent literature around student engagement. That is, a two-way approach is being promulgated based on the responsibility of institutions to meet the needs

of its students rather than on students themselves to solely adapt to institutional practices. Framing student engagement in this way is reflective of a social model of engagement whereby the practices, culture and 'climate' of the institution are seen to either support or hinder the experience of the student.

The 'What Works?' project (Thomas, 2012) considers the literature underpinning issues to do with student engagement, belonging, retention and success within the HE sector; the seven projects undertaken across 22 HE institutions conclude that there is a "compelling case that in higher education, belonging is critical to student retention and success" (Thomas, 2012, p.10). While I recognise the proposed links between belonging and student success (Cureton, 2016; Thomas, 2012), I am curious as to the use of the term 'belonging' which appears to have been increasingly adopted within the academic literature on HE engagement. Zepke (2015) offers it as Thomas' (2012) re-framing of the more traditional concepts of academic and social integration, expounded by Tinto (1987) in the US. It is argued that a strong sense of belonging is a result of student engagement (Thomas, 2012) and as such it would seem to be embedded within a specific, institutionally-constructed definition of the term. Within the 'What Works?' Project (Thomas, 2012), it is offered in the following way:

Student belonging is achieved through:

- Supportive peer relations
  - Meaningful interaction between staff and students
  - Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners
  - An HE experience relevant to students' interests and future goals
- (Thomas, 2012, pp. 14-15)

As a concept, then, belonging is constructed as the strategic tool by which students will be encouraged to engage in academic activities in order to succeed; “nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participate in” (Thomas, 2012, p.12). The Project emphasises that such a strategy is ethically circumspect in regard to: the University, which will lose funds if students withdraw from study; the student, who will incur debt, risk earning less income over their life time, and acquire less human capital; and to society which will experience less potential for community participation and may realise adults who are less healthy (Thomas, 2012, p.7). A subsequent study, What Works?2 (Thomas *et al.*, 2017), details activities undertaken by 13 UK universities, over a period of three years, in the areas of student induction, active learning and co-curricular activities, such as personal tutoring. In both studies, the necessity to encourage belonging is offered as a way forward in order to orient students towards success in terms of retention and good academic outcomes.

Such a strategy is timely in light of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (HEFCE, 2017) which requires data to be submitted from all universities in regard to aspects of quality, learning environment, and student outcomes. This last aspect will also take into account numbers of students who do not enrol for their second year of study immediately following the first year of entry to HE - “non-continuation data” (HEFCE, 2017) – which may be significant for those post-1992 universities whose new demographic of students has been shown to offer the potential for the highest attrition rates. Student outcomes will also be measured in regard to the overall classification of degree awards; a ‘first’ or ‘2.1’ (Second Class,

1<sup>st</sup> division) are considered to be 'good' honours degree outcomes. It is in the interests of the university to guide students in the direction of successful outcomes in order that appropriate metrics can be met. TEF measures include responses from the National Student Survey (NSS), which consider aspects to do with the quality of teaching on the courses, the assessment and feedback procedures, and the academic support available. In order for students to be able to report on such aspects, it is incumbent upon them to engage with the processes on offer; failure to do so may result in a lower than 'good' honours degree outcome and may have the potential to compromise expected responses to NSS questions to validate a university that is strategically 'reaching out' to its students. In order to engage, as part of developing a sense of belonging, students are required to be measured according to a range of engagement indicators to do with how students "integrate, behave and perform" (Thomas, 2012, p.10). The What Works?2 (Thomas *et al.*, 2017) develops short scales relating to 'belongingness' as identified within a survey, administered to students on seven occasions over the three year period of the project; considerable caution, however, is suggested by these authors in relation to its findings owing to the variables in a range of factors, inclusive of sizes of student cohorts (p.143).

I am concerned that belonging, as a resultant product of engagement, is compromised by the need for it to be measured, as if it were an objective commodity. Based upon the paramountcy of both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, as encompassed within Thomas' (2012) ways of fostering belonging, it is difficult to imagine how such a relational space might be objectively

measured. Zepke (2015) decries the certainty afforded by quantitative data that can provide measurements of quality as “measures (which) become a technology of control” (p. 5), limiting the ways in which engagement might be conceptualised and resulting in a culture of compliance. Bryson and Hardy (2012) are similarly scathing of measuring what students do as a way of assessing levels of engagement, while Solomonides, Reid and Petocz (2012, p. 21) argue that the “impedimenta of modern university teaching may also mean staff have less time to devote to supporting engagement.”

As I became immersed in this research study, the challenges of working to foster belonging became more interesting to me than the ways of securing student engagement. Belonging seemed to offer aspects beyond an operationalising of specific behavioural processes and appealed to my sense of the social-emotional. I was keen to know how belonging might be experienced, how it was understood, and how students might articulate a sense of belonging. As a result, my research study underwent a shift in focus as I re-aligned the lens of my enquiry to that of the topic of belonging. I maintained my choice to work within a narrative inquiry methodology, affirming the values of a person-centred approach, and I also added a range of creative strategies (Kara, 2015) to enhance my study as a way to facilitate the voices of my research participants. Following my pilot study, my focus was further fine-tuned; I became drawn to the significance of metaphor and this has become a main tenet of this study. The use of metaphor as a way of facilitating, and enriching, the meaning-making process (Fletcher, 2013) provides me with a means of envisioning possibilities, which will be ‘mirrored’ within the

creative strategies of research methods (Kara, 2015) to be employed later in this study. Keen to privilege the voices of my participants, I have placed their articulations of belonging, couched in terms of metaphor, as central to this study.

### Belonging as strategy

As HE has entered into the market place, so too have its procedures and practices needed to change. Emphasis upon the 'student experience', evaluated in terms of a myriad of approaches, both internal and external, is now a requirement of a system offering a service to the paying customer. This has implications for the positioning of students who are often conversant with consumer rights, if not with HE institutional practices. Advertising of the product, via open days staffed by smiling academic tutors and suitably satisfied current students, expensively-designed prospectuses, and interactive websites, seeks to present the university as the option of choice. While promotional literature may not always reflect the lifeworlds of prospective students (Archer and Hutchings, 2000), nor the oft-employed 'campus tour' depict familiar cultural values and codes of behaviour (Magolda, 2000), the need to recruit is paramount for the survival of the university within the contemporary neo-liberal political climate.

The current rhetoric that promotes 'a sense of belonging' would seem a seductive strategy to entice would-be students and their families; for the importance of family to financially support the student places on them considerable influence within the decision-making process. The appeal to the affective domain of belonging, as I would suggest it is understood in its everyday parlance, and to be explored later in this study, offers a powerful marketing tool, while institutional



definitions of the term would seem to encompass far more instrumental indices to do with measuring attendance rates, ensuring student expectations are realistic, and improving the academic skills set to conform to HE writing conventions. Such instrumentalism is not without its logic; the market forces necessitate that students are satisfied and achieve 'good outcomes'. Shaping what those expectations might be, therefore, would seem an expedient way forward. The tautology of the argument appears, then, to be complete: in order to succeed in HE, the student needs to engage with a number of identified factors and this will be couched in terms of 'belonging'; developing a 'sense of belonging' will, therefore, add to the potential to succeed in HE. In terms of a colonising process (Mann, 2001), a sense of belonging has now been re-ascribed to infer a more objectified account of belonging; the affective dimension, which is 'sensed' (Katz, 1999), has been objectified in terms of engagement practices so that it might be measured, analysed, and evaluated within a system of metrics.

The notion of being measured against a set of criteria in order to constitute belonging is reminiscent of David Blunkett in 2001 who, as Home Secretary, mooted the establishment of a 'sense of belonging' as a pre-requisite for gaining British citizenship; this was in order to enhance social cohesion in light of race riots in the summer of that year (Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2005, p. 526). It is perhaps of interest to consider to what extent this finds a parallel within an HE sector that is feeling threatened amid its changing demographic. It has been argued that the notion of belonging only becomes visible (Anthias, 2002), and so articulated and reflexive (Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2005), and politicized

(Yuval-Davis, 2006), when such naturalized ways of being, thinking and acting are threatened in some way. Challenging traditional academic practices may then engender the need to establish a sense of belonging that is required for the well-being of the HE institution itself rather than for the well-being of the student *per se*.

In order to add to the general academic discussion around the concept of belonging within the HE sector, I wish to highlight the premise that absence of belonging is the factor that triggers thoughts on what it might be and how one might achieve it. In this sense, the notion of belonging is one that may not have been reflected upon by those who feel they do belong; it becomes one of those taken-for-granted concepts that only becomes visible in its absence (Anthias, 2002, 2006). The exploration of belonging, then, is best suited to those situations in which people find themselves 'out of place' or dislocated from the unconscious familiarity of life.

#### Researcher reflexivity

My own concept of belonging is integral to this study since I, as researcher, am a part of the 'context' within which this research is carried out. Choosing to work within the influence of feminist methodologies recognises the need for a researcher reflexive stance: "Reflexivity means reflecting upon and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual autobiographies as researchers and making explicit where we are located in relation to our research respondents" (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p. 121). Notwithstanding my desire to work within a

person-centred approach with research participants, I have had to interrogate my own feelings around belonging. This has been more painful than I supposed.

Many years ago, as a white, female, third year FGS undergraduate, my choice of a black life partner caused a major and fairly irretrievable disjuncture in my family; my father's ultimatum – "him or us" – severed the family for about ten years.

Although my mother kept in touch and I saw her occasionally, the emotional trauma of being disowned, having to seek a hardship payment from my university for a final year of study, and knowing that a decision which followed my heart and my integrity could bring upon me such disavowal from loving parents was a difficult lesson. I am surprised at my choice of 'belonging' for this doctoral study, although a psychoanalyst may harbour no surprise at all; perhaps I am trying to make meaning of it and as such I locate myself firmly within this study. I begin to wonder to what extent my choice of research focus around belonging is influenced by my own desire still to belong, to feel at ease, and to be myself. Quinn (2010) would argue that 'myself' is my own 'unself', characterized by flux, risk and uncertainty (p.28), endowed with energy to provide a dynamic force for movement, and change. Such a concept holds potential for my own well-being and also a perspective to encompass more widely as I move into this research study.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

As a way of 'journeying' alongside my chosen student population within this review of literature, I choose to position the FGS within a discourse of migration; that is, I use the topic of migration as a focus for my lens of enquiry. In seeking to re-think the construct of belonging and in order to afford new insights, this review of literature includes readings from a range of interdisciplinary sources, inclusive of cultural anthropology and human geography; this will seek to add to studies conducted in educational contexts both in the UK and beyond. I shall be paying particular attention within this review to aspects that have the potential to shed light on the experience of belonging. Since belonging is best interrogated in circumstances of disjuncture or unfamiliarity, I have chosen to situate the non-traditional student, constituted here as FGS, in terms of the metaphorical migrant.

I am particularly interested in the construct of belonging as it has been expounded within a multi-disciplinary context. I am mindful that much of the literature on belonging within education pertains to schools and only more recently has interest within the HE sector been witnessed (Cureton, 2016). While I shall review findings from within the educational sphere, I wish to pursue a broad and nuanced understanding of the construct of belonging. In this way, my reading of literature will endeavour to reflect the multi-disciplinary methodological framework of narrative inquiry that I have chosen for my research approach; this will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

Within this review of literature, I will assess the contributions made by readings to the understanding of belonging, and how such understandings might be useful in conceptualising the development of a sense of belonging, within HE, as a way to progressing student success. Situating FGS within a migratory lens, my aim is to uncover aspects to do with belonging that may as yet have received little attention within the HE context, but which may serve to expand the construct, and so shed light on ways of moving forward in terms of student success. Situating my study within an ecological framework and seeking to privilege the voices of my participants, I pose two research questions that guide me through the review of literature and form the basis of my study:

- **RQ1:** What are the ways in which the lifeworld of the student impacts their engagement with the university?
- **RQ2:** How do students articulate their sense of belonging?

### A migratory lens

Media coverage of migrant, and refugee, populations journeying perilously to unfamiliar terrain, where they are variously welcomed and assisted, or corralled and vilified, continue to stimulate our senses (Wintour, 2017). In populist culture, the image of the 'migrant' is constructed as 'the problem' to be resolved; humanity wrestles with its conscience, it would seem, balancing issues of ethics and logistics, while decisions to do with cost and wider effects on indigenous populations are foregrounded. In similar vein, as I shall explore in this review, the FGS is positioned as 'out of place' and in danger of contaminating existing

educational standards (Burke, 2012) within the HE arena. The metaphor of the migrant to identify the non-traditional student, however, is not new.

In an insightful study on issues of engagement and alienation, Mann (2001) argues that the HE student enters into a pre-existing discourse where the discursive practices locate the student in particular ways. She evocatively describes the student as “akin to the colonised or the migrant from the colonised land, where the experience of alienation arises from being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world—in other words, a kind of colonising process” (Mann, 2001, p.11). While Mann (2001) argues that such a notion may apply to any student entering HE, she concedes that it is more likely to appertain to the non-traditional student; this would seem to find echoes within more recent literature (Thomas and Quinn, 2007), specifically focused on the FGS, whereby the student is constructed as ‘deficit’ and whose potential contribution to HE is ignored. The process of colonisation is a strong metaphor for what is experienced within the constraints of a conservative and elitist approach to HE (Thompson, 2012), predicated on traditional understandings of what it means to be a student. As a site for the subjugation of peoples and the eradication of ‘indigenous knowledge’ (Dumbrill and Green, 2008), education has been successfully employed across the historical and global spectrum and there is evidence to support an argument that the FGS is similarly subject to a major re-shaping in order to be measured against the “ideal-student subject” (Burke, 2012, p. 116), who is representative of the traditional undergraduate student.

Traditional ways of knowing, thinking and acting are aspects to be learned by the migrant if assimilation to the host population is to be successful; conforming to dominant ways of being a learner and accepting what counts as knowledge (Jackson, 2011, p.7). In her cultural critique of happiness, Ahmed (2010) argues that the migrant who is perceived by society to be happy is the migrant who has successfully assimilated into the culture; in contrast, those who retain memories of their old cultures, exposing the injustice that lies hidden below the surface, are labelled "affect aliens" (p.141) and become Ahmed's "melancholic migrant" (p.142). In an interesting article by Australian authors, Harris, Marlowe and Nyuon (2014), the experiences of South Sudanese women and men are discussed in relation to their status as actual migrants to Australia's HE system. These authors argue that the trope of 'melancholy migrant' serves to reinforce the deficit framing of the migrant, wherein the perceived reductionist assumptions of low academic expectations, of themselves, as well as those of academics of this group, are compounded by a general "inability to see educational success or career track options where they exist" (Harris, Marlow and Nyuon, 2014, p. 3). The article, moreover, offers a rejection of Ahmed's (2010) 'melancholy migrant' in terms of its binary positioning, and although it supports the difficulties encountered by the migrant learners, it details the demonstrated abilities of these migrants to achieve, "enriched by their previous experiences and knowledges, rather than impoverished by them" (Harris, Marlowe and Nyuon, 2014, p. 12). In support of such a viewpoint, the migrant (refugee) student 'Skiddo' is introduced by Burke (2012, pp. 113-115) to attest to the capacity of individual agency to succeed within an institutional framework of disadvantage, drawing on qualities and

aspirations acquired from previous life experiences: "Skiddo constructs his aspirations as related to the tribal community to which he continues to have a strong sense of belonging" (p. 115). Such belonging, borne of lived experience and embodied memories, is helpful in continuing to develop a nuanced understanding of the construct.

In keeping with my use of the migrant metaphor, and to retain my lens on migration, a study on 'belonging out of context' (Ahmed, 2011) is helpful in moving forward. The study details the experiences of retired, white women 'lifestyle migrants' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009) in the Costa Blanca, and their relationship with place, networks and ethnic identity. Noting that the concept of belonging is important when attempting to understand the experiences of migration, Ahmed (2011) remarks:

Given that 'a sense of, or concern with, belonging becomes activated most strongly when there is a sense of exclusion' (Anthias, 2006, p.21), focusing on how people experience belonging to places, networks and ethnic group can illuminate how they achieve intimacy with the world in the absence of that intimacy when they are out of context. Belonging therefore can be understood to represent being or feeling *a part of rather than apart from* which reflects both intimacy and distance and encompasses places, networks and ethnic group. This denotes the multi-dimensional, complex and overlapping nature of different forms of belonging.

(Ahmed, 2011, pp. 16-17, original emphases)

These words have import for my own study within an ecological framework and support the subjectivity and complex nature of belonging. Positioned at the margins of society, the migrant has an ambivalent status (Ahmed, 2011, p. 9) and, for these women, the lack of ability to speak Spanish adds to their segregation.



Language is an issue for Mann's (2001) student as 'outsider in a foreign land' who "lose(s) their capacity to connect with their own desire, voice and language" (p.12). The ability to live within an environment without mixing with the hosts, or learning the language, is posited by Ahmed (2011) but relies upon networks within their numbers in order to find safety; belonging and safety are both "intangible and elusive – or imagined.....(and) simultaneously experienced as 'real'" (p. 12). This offers an important dimension to the concept of belonging; that is, it may be the perception of belonging as an available safety or social support measure that is significant, rather than the need for it to be 'provided' as such (Jack, 2000, p. 707). For Ahmed's (2011) women migrants, however, this version of belonging offers a default position (p. 13), since no other opportunities are possible. The limitation of linguistic capital is one often mooted in regard to the FGS who has to learn new modes of 'academic' expression in order to accommodate to conventions of writing and speaking.

In a study which offers an examination of factors that influence feelings of belonging within three distinct migrant groups in Canada, Hardwick (2014) introduces the notion of the migrant who wishes to keep a low profile, since "the fear of being identified as an unauthorized migrant provides little or no opportunities to contribute (to the broader community)" (p. 273). Such a sentiment finds resonance within the deficit framing of the FGS who is perceived as the 'wrong' type of student, not able to cope with the academic demands of the course, and whose admission is reflective of a 'dumbing down' of provision (Finnigan, 2009, p. 135). In effect, the fraudulent nature of the FGS is exposed

and they find themselves 'out of place', not worthy of being in HE. It is important to consider, in light of such argument, the extent to which instrumentalist mechanisms to draw the FGS into involvement with remedial support structures might be meaningful, or indeed, desirable, and that FGS resistance to such support may, institutionally, be interpreted as confirmation of the 'problem' student, so reinforcing their negative framing and the need to 'fix' them (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Remedial support, however, may negate the influence of support structures that are already in place for FGS, about which nothing is known, or sought, by the HE institutional processes.

The curiosity required to 'know' the student is revealed in an ethnographic study of five culturally and linguistically diverse US elementary students' households (Kinney, 2015) in which an 'asset-based' approach is employed to discover the resources and strengths drawn from the household; to include networks both within and outside of the family, skills, attributes, experiences, labour histories and geographical movements (p.13). This particular study has practical implications for HE in terms of the FGS as it concludes that knowing the strengths brought into school by these 'diverse learners', providing a positive framing of these children's worlds, will afford teaching staff ways of working to support them in their learning. Moving to a 'transformative approach' of support, Thomas and Quinn (2007) similarly acknowledge the need for institutions to change their educational practices in order to benefit from, and to maximise, the diverse range of strengths brought to the university by the FGS. In addition, they emphasise the rarely-acknowledged aspect of parental educational background of the FGS which can

affect the student's chances of success over the long term; they advocate "build(ing) on informal learning within families and communities rather than positioning the latter as simply places to escape from" (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 128), so necessitating the coming together of community-based informal learning and the more specific widening participation activities (p. 130). I wish to argue that this overlapping of contexts finds support within an ecological systems theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and I draw on such theory as a means of illuminating the wide range of influences that impact on FGS' articulations of belonging within this study.

As a way of moving from an 'academic approach', with its emphasis upon the need for the student to change, to a more 'transformative' perspective, with its emphasis upon the need for the institution to change (Thomas and Quinn, 2007), I wish to introduce a further metaphor which seeks to unfold, and bind together, my ongoing conceptual framework. For now, the notion of belonging is problematized by Young (1990) who introduces the concept of the "unoppressive city . . . the city as a *kind of relationship* of people to one another. . . [where] City life is the 'being-together' of strangers" (pp. 317-318 original emphases). Young (1990) posits that life in the city embraces diversity, where people of different cultures and lifestyles live side by side, without having to understand each other or become like each other: "They witness one another's cultures and functions in such public interactions, without adopting them as their own" (p.319). This, she argues, is in contrast to the usual concept of 'community' which presents as a more homogenous grouping, where difference is suppressed in favour of a striving

for mutual identification and shared understanding. The city dwellers do not seek to establish a common identity with fellow city dwellers but inhabit the space, and those public spaces within the city, in a way that allows for interaction, and limitless possibilities in terms of “becoming acquainted with new and different people, with different cultural and social experiences; the possibility always exists for new groups to form or emerge around specific interests” (p.319). I am drawn to this view of belonging as it obviates the need for conformity and compliance, which presents itself as a controlling discourse, and opens the way for greater acceptance of the diversity of students currently attending HE. Attempting to prescribe student ways of being, once at the university, is problematic in light of policies around equality and diversity; the homogenizing effect of ‘shaping’ students to act and talk in certain ways may well lend itself to the potential for greater academic outcomes, in terms of student achievement and so institutional prowess, but to what extent this militates against personal integrity, and policy drives towards inclusion, is in need of wider ethical scrutiny.

Based on Young’s (1990) envisioning of ways of being and living, Quinn (2010) proposes that the view of universities as ‘learning communities’ may be flawed; she advocates the need to see universities as places where students can retain their individuality and come together as “benign strangers” who are not required to adopt “normalised” ways of talking and behaving (Quinn, 2010, p.61). Quinn further argues that a drive towards unity and shared values ignores and devalues difference, and that communities can serve to make visible those who do not belong (p.63). This would seem to find echoes with Ahmed’s (2011, p. 9) earlier

mention of the ambivalent status of the migrant, standing at the margins, and where a sense of belonging becomes ever more significant as the feeling of exclusion prevails. However, for Young (1990), the ideal is the “unoppressive city . . . defined as openness to unassimilated otherness” (p.319) and while she notes that such a social relations does not currently exist in society, she poses it as a concept to be developed. I wish to argue that perhaps a more realistic approach might be to identify spaces for the coexistence of peoples; where, within an ecological framing, people might be seen to inhabit different spaces within the same ecosystem. Young's (1990) ideas around the 'unoppressive city' have much to offer here in terms of difference being acknowledged, accepted and valued rather than suppressed and homogenised into a unified view of the student demographic. For me, it attests to the foregrounding of diversity and for Quinn (2010), it provides a basis for her own concept of 'imagined social capital' wherein students might draw on their own resources as a way of re-imagining universities (p.52). Burke's (2012,) refugee student, Skiddo, noted earlier, would seem to embody such a concept, in his capacity to construct his own aspirations, where he “positions himself as the masterful, included subject, irrespective of his diasporic experiences as a refugee and his current location as the student marked by discourses of disadvantage, migration and difference” (p. 115).

The role of university as a forum for promoting social justice is eloquently expounded by the first Hispanic President of the University of Miami, talking of the need for acceptance while not suppressing issues of conflict:

UNIVERSITIES (sic) must commit to exploring this tough balance, and that is why we need 'a scholarship of belonging'. The components of

"belonging" are suggestive: "Be" -- as in being -- signifies authenticity and freedom from the need to cover aspects of one's identity. "Longing" reminds us of the profound human yearning to connect with others and be part of something that transcends us.

(Frenk, 2016)

Such an 'unpacking' of the term is instructive in its affective dimension and in its location within the realm of academia.

### Concept of place

The influence of Mann's (2001) notion of 'migrant' or 'outsider' resonates strongly with the concept of place. Providing insights from human geography to bear upon traditional anthropological understandings, Rodman (1992, p.641) notes: "Places have multiple meanings that are constructed spatially. The physical, emotional and experiential realities places hold for their inhabitants at particular times need to be understood apart from their creation as the locales of ethnography". This offers an important insight into the connectedness that may be afforded by place; it also highlights the potential barriers to belonging that may be latent within such environmental spaces. The emotionality of space is an aspect that is expounded by Sagan (2008), for whom space is not neutral but "branded with particular race, class and gender 'affiliations'" (p. 176); these, she posits, are to do with "the privileged, the male, and the white" (p.176).

A similar argument is offered by Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) who highlight the notion of entitlement felt by those HE students with such characteristics; that is, they do not question their right to belong. In contrast, the diversity of backgrounds of non-traditional students, encompassing FGS, may

represent very different 'affiliations' but that "the presence of students of similar age, class, gender or ethnicity is not necessarily sufficient to enable them to feel comfortable in the environment of the university, to make them feel like they 'belong'" (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p. 271). Such a viewpoint may support growing concerns that Western education is dominated by Eurocentric curriculum content, delivery, and infrastructure (Dumbrill and Green, 2008), so according minimum valuing of indigenous knowledges. The prevalence, too, of teaching staff from dominant groupings may also work against those students whose backgrounds are perceived to be very different from their own (Cruz and Stake, 2012). Feeling comfortable, then, as an entry point to belonging, may represent a complex array of factors.

Places represent more than physical environments; they provide aspects of sociality, materiality and affectivity (Raffaeta and Duff, 2013) within which the lifeworlds of peoples are enacted existentially, so revealing a "*practicing of place*" (p.343 original emphasis). The widening demographic accessing HE brings with it an expanded set of social and cultural norms looking to find expression within the spaces of the university. Just as Raffaeta and Duff's (2013) study of Ecuadorian migrants re-settling in Northern Italy find their ways of using public spaces to be at variance with the host population, so too it can be argued that traditional HE spaces, ascribed meaning forged of history and culture (Rodman, 1992, p.643), may now bear witness to behaviours that are deemed inappropriate when measured against the "ideal-student subject" (Burke, 2012, p116). Instrumentalist reactions to such behaviours, in the guise of student charters or codes of conduct,

or more intangible responses conveyed by looks or remarks, may ride roughshod over differing values and sensibilities, so alienating those unfamiliar with traditional ways of being in HE.

For students drawn into HE via the Widening Participation agenda, the emotionally-charged learning spaces they may have experienced in the past, with memories of humiliation, hostility and anxiety, may haunt the classrooms still (Sagan, 2008, p.180). As a young child, Sagan's (2008) own place of safety was to be found behind a door in a small space (p.178) and this, she argues, is carried in her memory as a way of measuring the safety of other spaces. The philosophical argument is developed that places are culturally and socially constructed by 'horizons' of those who have gone before; this has particular resonance for my own research whereby contemporary students may come to an everyday 'practicing of place' within an environment, both physical and emotional, that has been constructed by values and practices very different to those required by today's students. Having an understanding of the 'historical horizon' (Gadamer, 1960) is important in ascribing meaning to current places in the same way as it is important to acknowledge that understandings gleaned from the historical horizon will necessarily be interpreted from understandings of the present; in the words of Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p.106) "Hermeneutics makes us aware that, in a reciprocal interpretive process, the present is interpreted in terms of the texts of the past and their historical context, although those texts and that context are themselves interpreted in terms of the present". Such a hermeneutic is significant for my study as students will discursively interpret practices within the university



from their own horizon and draw meaning from it. Such processes, however, also offer the potential for positive associations to enhance feelings of belonging.

Based on the anthropological work of Munn (1990), which considers how events in the present are shaped by their associations to the past and also to the future, Rodman (1992, p. 644) develops the argument to include places so that she posits “lived spaces are developed through infusing experience in one place with the evocation of other events and places”, so reinforcing the notion that places are discursively constructed, socially and culturally. An excellent example of this is to be found in a study by Finnigan (2009, p. 143) where a Lebanese student “set out to find traces of home in London. . . to make London and her university life an extended part of her home”. This desire to make links between places, and spaces, that have relevance for the student is noteworthy in terms of its ability to build a sense of belonging, of safety, and of security within an otherwise liminal terrain of “betwixt and between” (Auton-Cuff and Gruenhage, 2014, p. 3); for the student, this may be represented by the movement between the spaces of home, work and university. As such, the emotional content of personal experiences, drawn from varying contexts, can serve to support time spent in unfamiliar landscapes. In contrast, Vandemark (2007), in a study focusing on homelessness – those who have no place at all (Rodman, 1992, p. 650) – discusses how people project themselves onto the physical environment and how subsequent loss of these “meaningful places and treasured objects” (Vandemark, 2007, p. 244) can affect a sense of self-cohesion and belonging. The availability of spaces within the university environment, then, to overlay with personal ‘markers’, would seem an

important contributing factor to feelings of belonging, to “see how places represent people, and begin to understand how people embody places” (Rodman, 1992, p. 652).

The use of markers, or messaging, can be institutionally generated in order to offer a sense of how places are accepting and welcoming of students; omission of such messaging, or of the values that underpin them, can do much to add to the exclusion of students. For first year LGBPQ students in an American university, the positive LGBPQ campus messaging that is visible to all represents a contributing factor to belonging: “It was not necessarily about whether the university welcomed *me* personally but how well CU [pseudonym for university] accepted and welcomed people *like me*” (Vaccaro and Newman, 2017, p. 146, original emphases). In this study, articulations of belonging were drawn specifically from lived experiences of students deemed to face challenges in finding comfort and acceptance in unwelcoming campuses; that is, students ‘at the margins’ for whom exclusion was within their lived experience. The findings suggest that an inclusive campus environment, where discriminatory remarks and attitudes are openly challenged by leaders and campus staff, offers a clear indication to students that they are accepted and valued for who they are. Students in the research noted that it was the presence of such positive messaging that was important rather than their participation within organisations available. This echoes the work of Jack (2000) who, working within an ecological framework around support for families, notes that it is not the use of community facilities that is significant but their availability if needed. For me, this aligns with the non-oppressive ideas of

Young (1990) and works to combat notions of a colonising narrative whereby students are required to 'fit in' by changing who they are.

The value of diversity is seen as key to Looker's (2014) characteristics of a community which fosters a sense of belonging in its citizens. The study, based on rural and non-rural communities in Canada using self-reporting in response to household surveys, found that "the more open to diversity an individual says their community is, the more likely they are to say they feel like they, themselves, belong there" (p. 176). Looker (2014) finds four variables that influence the sense of belonging people feel in relation to their community: participation, perceived effectiveness of community leaders, having many leaders, and having an open community (Looker, 2014, p. 176); in terms of 'openness', aspects are interpreted as being open to different opinions, to accepting people from different racial and ethnic groups, to considering people within the community being friendly with outsiders, and to women and young adults (under the age of 35) having opportunities for leadership positions. It is pertinent perhaps that a sense of belonging developed in this environment highlights the role of leadership, pointing to the more structural aspects which are seen here to be required in order to produce such belonging; similar findings are provided by Thomas *et al.* (2017).

In contrast, a study looking at belonging as articulated by working class 14-16 years olds in Bermondsey, South-East London (Stahl and Habib, 2017) offers an account of young people actively negotiating their sense of belonging in light of negative discourses of their home town; aspects of racism and fervent nationalism

linked to the locale are acknowledged and integrated into a 'paradoxical' sense of belonging to place. Notions of belonging as negotiated, rather than fixed, are seen to provide a "coping mechanism to understand their attachment to their immediate locale" (Stahl and Habib, 2017, p. 13) and this is pertinent to my own study whereby FGS may be constructing their own subjective belongings in regard to the university, cognisant of the unfamiliar aspects that may offer challenges to them; in this way, a sense of belonging may be constituted as a 'coping mechanism'.

In terms of a more collective affinity to background within a construction of belonging, it may be that non-traditional students 'recognise' each other and so a sense of belonging is forged on the basis of empathy with others who may also be feeling 'out of place'. In this sense, FGS may construct belonging in a more political sense, just as the young working-class Bermondsey participant, Ellie, empathises with the 'struggle' that she shares with other Londoners, despite the outward appearance of London made possible by the "effort put into making it look so lovely" (Stahl and Habib, 2017, p.8); in similar vein, FGS may have feelings that resonate with the wider socio-cultural discourses that place them as 'other' and yet serve to unite them to construct counter-narratives to establish themselves as "having value in contexts where they are often devalued" (Stahl, 2015, p.668). To what extent this might undermine, or influence, a sense of belonging developed within traditional students may be interesting to speculate if focus is upon 'supportive peer relations' (Thomas, 2012). Relationships nested within an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) have the potential to

influence each other so that counter-narratives and traditional narratives may merge to form new possibilities (Young, 1990); again, this serves to challenge a colonising process that seeks to prescribe ways of belonging as a student within HE.

Negotiated forms of belonging may also be required within the home setting where wider socio-cultural discourses can influence the forms it may take. The notion of people inhabiting spaces, so infusing them with lived experiences, is one that can be readily understood in terms of familial, or home settings. The 'new realities of the student experience' (McInnis, 2003) encompassing responsibilities to do with childcare and part-/full-time employment may offer challenges to traditional gender relations, and so to ways of effective study patterns. A study on 'time and space' with regard to 'mature, distance learners' by Kahu *et al.* (2014) argues the need for students to allocate time and space for themselves in order to avoid the overlapping claims on time and space within the familial home; this offers a view of the student outside of the university domain, where spaces have pre-existing meanings and where time may seemingly 'belong' to others. Such overlapping claims will be experienced by full-time students also, of all ages, so that belonging may come to be regarded more as possession, or indeed, oppression.

Earlier research (Kember and Leung, 2004) found little room for manoeuvre in terms of negotiating in the work or family domain so that time was necessarily taken from the individual's personal social life; this can have social consequences

in regard to friendship circles and support networks. The need to personally negotiate suitable time and space for study, which will necessarily be determined by the students' own particular circumstances (Kahu *et al.*, 2014, p.530), resonates strongly with those autonomous aspects of creativity and freedom of individual expression (Finnigan, 2009) which, in contrast, do not seem reflected in university initiatives to 'shape' the non-traditional student. Interestingly, Kahu *et al.* (2014) research argues that the complexity of students' lives is not acknowledged, or known about, by those within HE, so that simplistic pledges of flexibility around distance learning, in this case, fail to recognise the multiplicity of roles and responsibilities within a familial home, with or without children. As a result, these authors posit that high attrition rates are not the result of failure to grasp the course content, but failure to establish time and space to study at home. This challenges the negative framing of the non-traditional student, certainly in terms of academic abilities, and acknowledges the multiplicity of 'competing-selves' (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2003) – or roles – that the non-traditional student has to juggle in order to persist and remain in HE; to claim their entitlement to a place.

Failure to claim places and spaces is expounded within the literature of cultural anthropology (Jolly, 1990, in Rodman, 1992), whereby displacement is an outcome of a colonial past and in which independence and cultural affinity are denied. The massification of HE may present related difficulties for some students not only within the culture of the academic world, but also within the home, particularly in regard to gender roles (Christie *et al.*, 2008; Tett, 2000) wherein

relationships need to be renegotiated as a way of claiming new possibilities, so that aspirations for the future may be achieved (Raffaeta and Duff, 2013). The legitimization of claims, however, is dependent upon the validation of others so that needs, desires, and aspirations have to be recognised, and deemed worthy, in order for those claims to be effected. A view of the non-traditional student as one who would contaminate HE educational standards (Burke, 2012) is therefore problematic. Choices made in regard to future trajectories, however, as the result of seeking to create a better life may be more socially acceptable, so that 'place', constituted by the culture of the university, however "bewildering" (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p. 271), can offer hope for the future in terms of reaping the rewards that such an education might offer (Basit, 2012).

Using the migratory lens to locate the FGS, metaphorically, can, however, compromise such educational aspirations. Negative framing of the migrant, in terms of populist discourse, tends to be predicated on the movement of peoples with low-skills who wish to avail themselves of better living conditions within a new location (Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2005); such a sentiment would seem to accompany perceptions of the non-traditional student entering into HE. An alternative rendering of the migrant is that offered within the discourse of 'lifestyle migration' (Benson, 2014; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009) whereby a globalised conception of the world offers opportunities for greater mobility. The material attribute of wealth affords choices to be made about where to live and quality of life. Interestingly, "destinations. . . (are) marketed to migrants on the grounds that they offer escape" (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, p. 612); university

marketing using 'belonging' as a seductive tool may offer similar incentives to become a student. Just as lifestyle migrants take with them transferable skills and invest considerable effort to work towards their chosen goals, so too do they demonstrate "common motivations" (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, p. 620) to do with bettering their life trajectories, escaping from the lives that they see as limiting, and taking greater control of their lives; this would seem comparable to the choices now being afforded to non-traditional students who may be highly motivated to succeed at university (Christie *et al.*, 2008; Tett, 2000).

For example, in considering the middle class culture of the university, based on Tett's (2000) study of Scottish working-class students, Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003, p.177) note that pride in their working-class identities positioned Tett's (2000) research participants outside of the middle class institution, where they are able "to benefit from participation while not belonging to, or feeling ownership of, the institution. As Fela (a black male student) suggested, in order not to 'allow' university to change him, he intended to adopt the same strategy as his friends, whereby 'they go though university, uni doesn't go through them'". As expressed here, belonging is seen to be different to participation; the notion of journeying alongside the institution in order to enhance future life chances would seem a pragmatic, and strategic, choice rather than a more subjective immersion within the institutional culture itself. Indeed, it may reflect Thomas' (2012) institutional belonging developed for students as "a strategy to support them to be successful" (p.7). In contrast, the aspect of 'feeling ownership of the institution' is an interesting perspective here, suggesting that it may be the institution that belongs



to the student, rather than the other way around. This has implications within the current marketised HE landscape wherein the 'consumer mind-set' heralds possibilities for shifting the balance of power; it may enable the student "to hold a position of greater power and centrality in the academic arena, for, of course, 'the customer is always right'" (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p.274).

The ability of the non-traditional student to resist the dominant cultural discourse of the university is seen, however, to be largely illusory, despite their strategic choices of post-1992 universities that they perceive to offer scope for feelings of greater familiarity within a diverse environment: "a theme that continuously recurred in the focus groups was a feeling of 'isolation' rather than 'belonging': a feeling that is related to the culture of the academy itself rather than the make-up of the student body" (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p.269). However, even within the student body, belonging may not be effected without difficulty. Despite utilising collaborative working strategies to encourage a sense of belonging in the classroom, a study by Masika and Jones (2016) found there were "sociality limits" (p.148) in their implementation, so that tensions and conflict arose between first year business school undergraduates. Focus groups, couched within an appreciative inquiry approach, elicited comments from participants that revealed exclusions and difficulties of working within communities of practice set up for student group working. Wondering what might happen within the broader socio-cultural contexts within which these students operate, these same authors suggest further research is needed as a way of investigating "nuanced factors that inhibit student success" (Masika and Jones, 2016, p.148). I wish to posit that

relationships between individuals, both university staff and students, offer many levels of complexity that can be revealed within the social-emotional dimension and which may serve to illuminate those 'nuanced factors' which may evade detection in the everyday world of academic teaching and learning. It is the recognition of such levels of complexity that I wish to foreground as an important contributing aspect of my own study. In affording the chance for a small number of FGS to voice their articulations of belonging within my research study, I seek to unveil some of those 'nuanced factors' as a way to re-think the construct of belonging.

Within the academic literature on belonging (Thomas, 2012), the concept of recognition pertains to rewards for staff, the acknowledgement for those who actively foster student belonging. I choose to employ a different meaning of recognition within this study. Here it is presented as the understanding or awareness of the complexities of interpersonal relationships between us all; such understanding can often be taken-for-granted and so represents, I argue, aspects of those 'nuanced factors' highlighted by Masika and Jones (2016). In ethical terms, the need to accept people for who they are is key to recognition; working with an increasingly diverse student demographic poses challenges to this, and belonging can be difficult to achieve if students are required to compromise who they are (O'Keefe, 2013). In light of institutional belonging being framed as equated with success, coupled with retention and achievement, then the need for recognition becomes politicised; accepting diversity for economic survival and competition within the marketised landscape of HE. The following section

considers aspects of recognition that have import for constructing a sense of belonging.

## Recognition

The 'mis-recognition' of under-represented groups within HE (Burke, 2012; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) is explored by Finnigan (2009) in a study on diverse students within creative practice: "Rather than viewing the students as the problem, assumptions about what is defined as *rational*, *neutral* knowledge in the academy, needs to be problematized" (Burn and Finnigan, 2003, p. 131, original emphases). Similarly, Burke (2012, p.186) argues the need to 'demystify' academic practices and forms of knowledge and make them accessible to those who have been historically excluded from the opportunity to engage with them; in addition, she advocates the need to critique and interrogate such practices and epistemologies alongside FGS as a way of 'opening up' avenues of further enquiry. For Burke (2012), this exemplifies a way to demonstrate an awareness of students' backgrounds and to work ethically towards fostering a sense of belonging within the academic environment. More recently, a study by Clarke (2015) supports the need to share pedagogical practices with students in order to enhance effective teaching as a two-way exchange. I would argue this has the potential to provide a more open, dialogical teaching-learning space wherein tutor and student can each be recognised by the other.

As a way of progressing such ethical working, Burke (2012, pp. 180-184) proposes a politics of difference, of redistribution and recognition; redistribution of

resources – to do with wealth – is seen as inseparable from the recognition of cultural values, while working ethically with difference involves ‘compassion’ which she qualifies as “an ongoing commitment to the project of challenging inequalities and mis/recognitions, despite the complex and unpredictable formations in which these emerge”(p. 187). The emphasis upon the valuing of difference resonates with Young’s (1990) “openness to unassimilated otherness” (p. 319) and yet Burke (2012) is not oblivious to the sophistication of skills that will be required of a university tutor, together with an awareness of how power operates within the classroom (p. 187), in order that such a way of teaching might be effective.

In addition, Mann (2008), employing a lens of power to interrogate the relationship between the student and the institution, finds that “HE has the capacity and potential to enable individuals to fulfil their potential as learners, but that this project can be undermined by the very institutional conditions within which this learning is undertaken” (p. 14). The middle class status of HE (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Thompson, 2012) is, then, mooted once more as a potential obstacle to non-traditional student success. In an article expounding the perils of teaching for equity in a meritocratic society, Cruz and Stake (2012) discuss the need for compliance to the system in order to be suitably measured against it; with a sense of irony, they write: “If we are so nice, rich, intelligent and so on, everybody else wishes to be like us” (p. 127). The alternative is to be identified as ‘out of place’ and yet issues to do with personal integrity, inclusion, and diversity are denied in this instance. Cruz and Stake’s (2012) declared message is that “everyone is different and needs rich opportunities to learn and develop their skills

and human potential” (p. 122). Such a way forward, however, depends on the attitudes of staff to difference, to their willingness to recognise differing cultural, social and linguistic capitals (Bourdieu, 1977; Kinney, 2015), and their confidence to work with ambiguity and uncertainty if they are to engage in ways of working which, for them, move away from the traditional. In this study, I choose to privilege the concept of asset-based working (Kinney, 2015) in contrast to the often-used focus upon Bourdieusian capitals.

As noted earlier, traditional classroom spaces may be haunted with fears from the past for many students attracted via the WP agenda so that an awareness of such emotional dimensions of learning (Sagan, 2008) by teaching staff may be helpful. Despite sensibilities being required in regard to students’ potential emotions, the importance of activating the affective dimension of ‘personal engagement’ has long been acknowledged (Morgan and Saxton, 1991, 2006) as a pedagogical tool to achieve a teaching-learning ‘climate’ conducive to students’ risk-taking and intellectual capacities. Morgan and Saxton (1991, 2006) introduce the notion of ‘internal teaching states’ and note that it is often the students who are reading the emotional engagement of the teacher more effectively than the other way around. This has direct implications for teaching staff who need to demonstrate that they care about the students (Fink, 2003; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) and who need also to examine their own values and beliefs since people are often unaware of their own biases (Cruz and Stake, 2012, p.123).

The importance of meaningful staff-student interactions is emphasised by Thomas (2012) and is deemed sufficiently significant as to warrant recommendations to embed such staff engagement into programmes of continuing professional development, staff recruitment processes, and job specifications. Similar findings in regard to the importance of the staff-student relationship are to be found in a study by Cousin and Cureton (2012) where the role of 'interlocutor' is seen to engender particularly successful outcomes, especially evidenced with students from minority-ethnic groupings. Such a social relations, however, is not so easily established. The relationship between people relies upon rapport and trust; the attributes necessary to develop such a relationship can be taken-for-granted and viewed simplistically.

The work of Treacher (2006) discusses what takes place in the spaces between human beings; she poses the question as to what an individual might need to give up to be accepted. This in itself is troubling, and yet can be seen to be an issue for the FGS who is endeavouring to 'fit in'. As in Young's (1990) work, Treacher (2006) emphasises the ethical requirement to recognise difference, and to respectfully work with it; proposing an 'ethics of recognition', she identifies the magnitude of the task: "The everyday for all of its ordinariness is also a vexed space which is full of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty. None of us are immune from the erosive attacks that take place in seemingly innocent and ordinary connections" (p.28). Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, Treacher (2006) explores both the relatedness, and separateness, which makes people human and concludes that there is no easy way for people to live together without

'unsettling' one another. As an echo here of the migratory lens, Treacher (2006) explains that her work is written at a time when she is settling into new surrounds – job, home, city – so that she confesses to be “on vulnerable ground at the moment and over-aware of my environment and other people” (p.29). She details interactions with others that 'unsettle' her; a seemingly 'innocent' question posed which indirectly interrogates her own (minority) ethnic positioning and an encounter with poverty, which, she finds, inflates her own sense of guilt. In and of themselves, the encounters are not intended to be harmful but the effects experienced by Treacher (2006) serve to disrupt her 'equilibrium' and leave her with feelings of their having “reopened a wound” (p.29).

The guidance to academic staff, then, to engage in meaningful interactions with students (Cousin and Cureton, 2012; Thomas, 2012), in order to foster a sense of belonging, would seem fraught with difficulty. For Young (1997), there is a requirement to have knowledge of differences of history and culture, together with issues based on class, gender and ethnicity, in order to respectfully work with others; Treacher (2006) herself is aware of the practical difficulties of such recognition and ways of working to uphold such an ethical stance. In a more recent article, Treacher Kabesh (2011, p.17) seems to offer some ways forward, seeking to explore “more engaged socio-political relationships . . . and facing up to how we all perpetuate and can be complicit with an exploitative social order, but also recognising the limits of our responsibilities”. Such a perspective would seem to point to the merits of a reflexive approach to teaching, where the HE tutor is responsible for their ongoing self-awareness. It does highlight issues also for all

students, who, as a widening and diverse demographic, find themselves thrown together in classrooms, where unexpected “psychic traffic” (Sagan, 2008, p. 182) lurks invisibly, awaiting delivery, or receipt, of Treacher’s (2006, p.28) inevitable “erosive attacks”. These, I would argue, represent some of those ‘nuanced factors’ (Masika and Jones, 2016) that can exclude students from feelings of belonging despite ostensible efforts to reach out by well-meaning staff and peers, as encouraged by an institutional framing of the construct.

Working also within a psychoanalytic framework, Sagan (2008) argues for the learner to be recognised as an “embodied, emotional subject” (p.175), despite the tendency to separate cognitive instruction from emotional support systems; for her, the need to ‘hold’ the anxiety of the student when working in the classroom is fundamental to affording an environment where learning and development might take place. This requirement adds yet further to the skills and attributes necessary of the effective HE tutor. The prevalence of classroom disruption in undergraduate classes in the UK has been researched, in regard to nursing, by Rivas (2009) who found that while younger and ‘mature’ students perceived classroom disruption differently, there were “classroom tensions between traditional and non-traditional students” (p.23); the study also noted that “diversity in the classroom can become a source of conflict if allowed to become a divisive factor” (Anderson, 1999, in Rivas, 2009, p.22). Ways of developing belonging, therefore, through encouraging peer working, may offer considerable hurdles to be overcome.



In addition, Rivas' (2009) study found that while some students may disengage from the lesson, staff members may be reluctant to divulge issues to do with classroom behaviour and may even demonstrate unacceptable behaviour themselves; in light of the Teaching Excellence Framework (HEFCE, 2017), which will introduce mandatory classroom observations, such difficulties may be highlighted, although staff fears of being blamed for such 'incivilities' will do little, perhaps, to induce a sense of belonging by staff to their institution. Indeed, the requirement for staff to feel a sense of belonging, to feel valued and accepted would seem an obvious pre-requisite for their being able to then exude a sense of belonging in regard to their students; my thinking is based upon an ecological premise where interconnectedness and reciprocity are foregrounded.

Research on the topic of staff belonging within the higher education context is limited, although staff characteristics to do with race are evidenced as barriers to belonging (Sian, 2017). O'Keefe (2013) discusses at length the requirement of staff to be caring, kind, virtuous and empathic, while Thomas *et al.* (2017) argue that staff involved in specific student engagement interventions can develop a sense of belonging within the institution. Returning, however, to the need to 'hold' the anxiety of the student (Sagan, 2008), the disruption, or classroom 'incivilities', may be the failure of academic staff to recognise the anxiety of the student and to work affectively and respectfully with it, and the frustration of the student – both traditional and non-traditional – to accept difference within the diverse undergraduate classroom. Recognition premised on mutual respect is a feature of person-centred working (Rogers, 1990; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) and offers a

way forward, I would argue, beyond that of a student-centred focus. Person-centred working privileges a more contextual perspective wherein the relationship that develops offers opportunity for growth and development, just as ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) comprises nested interconnections of the different 'systems' to offer affordances which can prove positive or negative for the growing and developing individual. The context of HE is similarly comprised of nested interconnections wherein a facilitative 'climate' can be created for all, based on the core conditions underpinning person-centred working, so that leadership that works ethically and respectfully with its staff may expect its staff, in turn, to work ethically and respectfully with its students; modelling of such behaviours within the diverse student classroom may offer potential for greater cohesion within the student body.

Diversity of racial background is represented in a thought-provoking study by Bettez (2010): 'Mixed-race women and epistemologies of belonging'. Here the mixed-race element of categorization problematizes and disrupts notions of belonging, both within kinship groups and wider communities. Voices of these mixed-race women unveil 'situated' belonging whereby they 'choose' to belong or not to belong; for instance, one Native American woman claims a belonging to this racial category only when she will be 'counted' for statistical purposes, adding to the visibility of such a minority group (Bettez, 2010, p. 147). However, this sense of agency is later located within a more complex relationship "between those who wish to belong and those who have the power to sanction or dismiss belonging" (Bettez, 2010, p. 156). Such tensions are found in Case's (2007) study,

mentioned in the Introduction section to my research study, and she notes in particular the way in which lines of racial demarcation are drawn; it is noteworthy, however, that Case's study is located in post-apartheid South Africa, although racial and social class divisions suggest similar findings in the UK (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011).

Choosing to belong, or 'performing belonging' (Bettez, 2010) finds resonance in Thrift's (2004) study in which, worryingly, he concludes that the performance of affect, manifested in abundance by contemporary media, is used to shape our being in specific ways, by particular institutions; it is no longer a random act but yet another form of power to control. He calls for a politics of affect to counter the otherwise de-humanising politics that are currently practised which he labels "landscape engineering" (p.68). Within a changing HE landscape in the UK, however, it is perhaps interesting to speculate to what extent personal agency of students is being used to perform belonging, as an expected behavioural response within the construct of student engagement, to placate bureaucratic demands for completion of national surveys and to provide an outer semblance of conformity. Such a performance of affect would necessarily militate against those "unstated proxies for engagement" (Trowler, 2010, p.17) mentioned earlier within this study. In order to minimise such performance of belonging, connecting with the emotionally-charged aspects of learning (Sagan, 2008), the opening up of curricular possibilities, moving away from a Eurocentric focus (Burke, 2012; Dumbrill and Green, 2008; Finnigan, 2009; Thomas and Quinn, 2007) and towards work inclusive of personal identity and culture (Finnigan, 2009; Mlcek and Pulla,

2014), would seem to offer a more socio-political arena within which to engage student learning. In addition, it could encourage reflection upon, and reflexive understanding of, lived experiences, and of influences upon these. In the words of one of Finnigan's (2009, p.143) research participants, undertaking a project on student voice: "I had a fantastic pathway leader and tutor who encouraged me to embrace what I know and to explore my culture". Such recognition of the individual in their own right, without wishing to 'fix' or 'shape' the person into what might be expected of an HE learner, offers an acknowledgement, and valuing, of the individual on their own terms. Within the perspective of person-centred working, it obviates the need for conformity to an institutionally-defined construct and offers scope for greater ontological engagement as a rounded citizen. This review of literature, having explored a range of issues in regard to the complexity of human relations and the topic of recognition, moves now to the aspect of 'voice'; to examine ways in which students might be encouraged to use their voice in order to create a sense of belonging.

## Voice

The migrant entering a new land may find themselves without a language that is recognised, and Mann's (2001) non-traditional student entering into the realms of post-1992 academia may similarly need to become proficient in ways of expression that are currently unfamiliar to them. However, Mann (2001) argues that the rigours of academic discourse, requiring rational and abstracted thought, may work against the more creative and non-rational side of the student, so suppressing those very aspects of thinking that might support them in their

learning (Feyerabend, 1999, in Mann, 2001, p.12). The importance of creativity is emphasised in Finnigan's (2009) study in which high-achieving students from diverse backgrounds, inclusive of FGS, use methods of visual art to express their thoughts and feelings of their learning experiences. For the staff, recognition of these student voices is stark: "[the session] fostered reflections about our positions as educators and what we "do" to students. Through creative media voices are made free in their space" (Finnigan, 2009, p. 148). As a project, the study sought to legitimate student voices in working towards change in the institution; the visual methods were seen as successful in promoting inclusive pedagogic practices against a backdrop of institutional deficit framing of non-traditional students. The freedom to choose suitable means of expression within the study is echoed by the freedom to explore personally-held views and beliefs within a study on resilience with first year undergraduates (Mlcek and Pulla, 2014).

In this latter study, social work students were encouraged to disclose and expose their ideas, feelings and vulnerabilities within online anonymous forums, as a means of 'intentional engagement' with the course materials. Activities and questions were deemed challenging to students, who had then to self-reflect on aspects to do with personal identity and values. This person-centred approach to engaging students was supported by intense monitoring and staff 'modelling' and found that "students' initial vulnerability in finding a voice to engage on more sophisticated and informed levels about some fairly weighty topics, is slowly replaced by resilience that comes from praxis wisdom; from cultural knowing;

from critical reflection about self, other individuals and communities” (Mlcek and Pulla, 2014, p. 12). This ‘coming to voice’ is an important aspect of HE teaching and learning whereby the student is enabled to participate in the ‘pedagogy of mutuality’ (Bruner, 2006) and can begin to become involved in the production of knowledge (Burke, 2012). Its focus on dialogue and active citizenry echoes the work of Alexander (2006) who espouses the imperative to work with learners dialogically, as a way of upholding democratic ideals; failure to come to voice invalidates the democratic process.

The nature of knowledge and who might legitimately produce it is the subject of ongoing research debate (Furlong and Salisbury, 2005; McNamara and Corbin, 2001; Usher, 1996). Social constructivism supports the contribution of learners in joint ‘meaning-making’ (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1990) and student-centred pedagogical approaches based on Dewey’s (1938) notion of something that ‘perplexes us’ continue to underpin calls for active student engagement. For Burke (2012), the need to combine “content and form” (p.144) is key to highlighting otherwise unspoken issues of ontology and epistemology for the student, so that all students might “engage with practices and forms of knowledge granted the highest levels of social esteem” (p. 186). This offers an important aspect of academic classroom practice whereby the extent to which “students are treated as active epistemic agents, i.e., participants in the production of their own knowledge” (Skidmore, 2006, p. 505) may determine the level to which they feel a sense of belonging to the student body and “ongoing cognitive quest” (Alexander, 2006, p. 35). A study by Lindsay *et al.* (2010) – where ‘*et al.*’ represent the

participatory contributions of three student colleagues who actively engage to 'author' their thoughts – argues that reflective practice is key to students being able to use personal experience as a way of creating knowledge and discovering possibilities for future practice: "For us, learning and transformation are, at least in part, internal processes that require activities to foster self-awareness for working within relationships" (p. 280). This need, and desire, to 'insert' oneself into the content and process of the curriculum is one that finds resonance within Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education, and one which firmly brings together the realms of intellect and of affect (Skidmore, 2006, pp. 512-513). Indeed, writing on the significance of discussion-based learning, Dillon (1994) notes that it is not so much the topic under discussion that is important but "our relation to it" (p. 32). This has implications for how the teaching-learning process is managed; attitudes of teaching staff influence the classroom 'climate', and their practices, inclusive of ways of speaking, can seek to minimise, or maximise, social distance between classroom participants (Wells, 1999, in Skidmore, 2006, p. 507).

Classroom pedagogy within the primary aged sector has been the subject of extended educational research (Alexander, 2000) and much has been written of the benefits of a dialogic approach to teaching and learning in the school context (Alexander, 2000, 2006; Lyle, 2008; Mercer and Littleton, 2007; Thompson, 2008). The use of dialogue to promote active student involvement not only increases the level of 'student-talk' – as opposed to a more transmission model of 'teacher-talk' – but it also offers a conduit for the affective element of learning. For Alexander (2006), a dialogic approach makes for a more inclusive environment

since it requires teaching staff to take account of learners' viewpoints, to encourage student questioning, and to nurture students' confidence and responsibility. For Skidmore (2006, p. 511), the mode of engagement offers a 'redistributive effect' resulting in a narrowing of the gap between those with lower and higher levels of prior attainment. For the non-traditional student, inclusive of FGS, the opportunity for expression through verbal means may offer more attractions than through the constraints of a written academic format, which has yet to be 'mastered', although Dillon (1994, p. 47) warns that, in regard to students in general, the ability to contribute to a 'good discussion' may still need to be guided by the tutor, even at university level. In addition, the opportunity of coming to voice via the written academic word continues to offer challenges to HE undergraduates and has become a particular focus of attention since the move to mass, as opposed to elite, higher education (Lillis, 2003).

Strategies to improve academic writing have seen the introduction of the concept of 'academic literacies' (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003; Wingate, 2012), and initiatives to enhance the student as 'author' continue as topics of research. The epistemological and authorial difficulties (Lea and Street, 1998) that are manifested in students' written work reflect institutional conventions whereby the personal pronoun is often discouraged, leaving students without a sense of voice, opinion or ownership of their writing. In Wingate's (2012) study, aspects of insecurity were raised which "related to students' uncertainty of how to express their voice, concerns about the lack of freedom to express their opinion, or about the need to refer to authoritative sources rather than their own knowledge"



(p.32). My research study focuses specifically on the voices of its participants in order to affirm the value of students' authored lived experiences and to legitimate them as a source of experiential knowing. For Burke (2012), academic writing conventions are constituted as yet another form of exclusion wherein the myth of writing as a means of representing what is known is foregrounded rather than the process of writing as a way of learning and meaning-making; the teaching of academic writing as technique and skills does not serve to aid the student "to develop their writing and sense of authorial voice" (p.145). She argues for hegemonic practices around academic writing to be reviewed, as a way of rectifying the misrecognition of non-traditional students in particular, who are judged by their (academic) writing abilities, and which acts as a "gate-keeping mechanism" (Burke, 2012, p. 149).

The inability to express themselves, as students, and to make connections with other aspects and interests in their lives, is powerfully conveyed by Lillis (2003) whose studies of Mary and Sara bring to the fore the burgeoning pressure to conform to what is required at the expense of their own integrity. Creativity, once again, is highlighted as central to the academic endeavour, whereby meaning-making needs to be unfettered by disciplinary constraints, as a process in which students can bring their own insights and experiences to bear upon meaningful understanding. Drawing on a Bakhtinian analysis, Lillis (2003) highlights the emphasis upon "meaning making as the encounter between difference" (p. 205) and this would seem to resonate with Young's (1990) concerns to work with difference, rather than to suppress it. The research participant, Mary, talks of

having to become someone else when she expresses herself through academic writing, “to change my frame of mind and you know, my way of thinking and everything. It’s just like a stranger, it’s like I’ve got two bodies in my head, and two personalities and there’s conflict” (Lillis, 2003, p. 202). The ‘stranger’ here is unable to find a place to be herself, unlike the concept of ‘stranger’ within Young’s (1990) ‘unoppressive city’ who is able to co-exist with others, holding on to a keen sense of individuality.

As a way of facilitating students’ effective participation within the academic norms of writing, Lillis (2003) suggests the dialogic means of ‘talkback’ rather than ‘feedback’ on students’ written texts; this, she argues, offers an opportunity for student and tutor to find a space to talk through potential conflicts in the writing, and to identify likes and dislikes of the student in regard to what they have expressed. The notion of Treacher’s (2006) ‘vexed spaces’ between peoples would seem to find an outlet here whereby greater empathy can be developed, and respectful working might be employed. In similar vein, a study by Cramp (2014) catalogues the benefits of a face-to-face review meeting between first year undergraduates and their personal tutor; its focus is the feedback received from the initial round of formal assessments with a view to talking through issues and planning for future success. The opportunity to express emotional responses in a safe environment is identified by students as a beneficial outcome of the meeting, especially at a time when written feedback commentary can affirm students’ own feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. Assessment is a pivotal aspect of the educative process and yet it can be misconstrued by students; negative comments

might be ignored, laughed at, or received as personal criticism. While none of these responses is the intended outcome, it serves to highlight the potential mismatch of understandings between student and tutor. The personalised space of a review meeting, for “open and supportive dialogue” (Cramp, 2014, p. 251), is advocated as a way in which to develop rapport and a respectful working relationship between student and tutor, although difficulties of operating within a managerialist HE system (Smith, 2007) provide barriers to availability of time, when tutors’ workloads may preclude effective engagement with students in this way.

#### Concluding comments

This review of literature has sought to re-think the construct of belonging and to focus upon its affective dimension. Drawing on insights from interdisciplinary literature, I have located belonging within a range of contexts in order to shed light on its invisible contours. I have suggested that belonging may have more to do with the social cohesion of the HE sector itself than that of the student per se. I have argued that an asset-based approach, which values the strengths brought to HE by the non-traditional student, needs to be more readily adopted so that attributes of the student can be recognised; that is, they can be afforded recognition within the interpersonal relationships between us all. My position is that the complexities of students’ lives can often confound the instrumentalist and observable behaviours that are judged to reflect levels of student engagement, and so their perceived sense of belonging. In consideration of belonging as a relational concept, I have argued that the sensitivities that appertain in the spaces

between individuals present challenges to a rhetoric that seeks to create belonging as a strategy for success.

Moving into the Methodology chapter, I reiterate my research questions that underpin the primary research enquiry for this study:

- **RQ1:** What are the ways in which the lifeworld of the student impacts their engagement with the university?
- **RQ2:** How do students articulate their sense of belonging?

My choice of research methodology is driven by the research questions. The following chapter sets out my methodological framework and offers my storying of the research process.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter sets out the theoretical bases for my methodological framing of narrative inquiry for this research study. Recognising the interplay between my own lived experience, values and professional training, I examine my choices in ways that seek to make plain my theoretical and epistemological positionings as researcher. Following on from this, I offer my own research story which seeks to provide details of the more practical implementation of the research process. In separating out the more theoretical from the practical, I seek to provide both the level of scholarship expected to afford rigour while also staying true to a storying narrative within this study.

#### **Theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of the study**

My interest in the lives of my participants lies within my background of having worked closely with young people and students over many decades. The need for a qualitative approach to my study was based on the desire to gather views, perceptions, and feelings from a small number of second year FGS in the Institute of Education in a post-1992 university. I required a methodology that offered scope for multiple ways of engaging with my participants, inclusive of creative strategies, as a way to facilitate discussion on topics that may not have been explored previously. In particular, my readings from a range of disciplines within the literature review and my choice to offer a migratory lens necessitated that I find an approach that could accommodate such an eclectic range of contexts. The area of narrative inquiry offered a pertinent way of working and the definition

provided by Chase (2005) suggested its breadth of scope as well as its potential for focus upon the depth of participant articulations:

I present narrative *inquiry* as a particular type – a subtype – of qualitative inquiry. Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them.

(Chase, 2005, p.651, original emphasis)

In order to offer a theoretical consideration of the methodological framework, as a way of entering into my topic of narrative ways of research, I wish to journey back to the temporal sphere of my own undergraduate days when Geertz (1973) was writing of methodological changes within cultural anthropology, a topic featured strongly within my literature review.

Narrative research was favoured within the discipline of cultural anthropology in the 1960s, as a way of distancing itself from the more positivist methods of investigation of the previous decades, and promoting a greater interest in the 'insider stories' of individuals (Chase, 2005). The anthropologist, Geertz (1973), laments the use, at that time, of scientific methodologies to investigate studies into the cultures of people; for him, the analysis of culture is not "an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (p.5). He argues that meaning, once the preoccupation of philosophers and literary critics, is now at the heart of cultural anthropology. For Geertz (1973, p. 30), the "essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available answers that others. . . have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man (sic) has said". In my own study, I sought to

uncover, not universal truths, but the views of those who inhabit the lifeworld of the post-1992 undergraduate FGS in order that they might be included in the 'consultable record' (Geertz, 1973) on issues of student engagement and belonging.

Working to privilege the search for meaning is keenly demonstrated by Geertz (1973) who discusses the differences in meaning of a twitch and a wink, both observable phenomena based on the same physical actions: on the one hand, in terms of 'thin description' and within a scientific recording, a wink is the contracting of the eye-lid; on the other, in terms of 'thick description' it is communicating in a quite precise and specific way (p. 6). Geertz (1973, p. 6) cements his argument by noting that, despite the similarities, the difference in meaning is vast "as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows". Meaning, then, within the realm of the social world is an interpretive process, although for Geertz (1973) and his ethnographers, the event is turned into an account via inscription. Within narrative inquiry, the event is kept central to the project; it is the interactional event of the process itself, between participant and researcher, which becomes the focus of study (Elliott, 2005; Mishler, 1986, 1999; Riessman, 1990, 1993) and where meaning is co-constructed.

In narrative inquiry, the researcher is required to offer a genuine 'self' to the participant and to work in an empathic manner (Elliott, 2005). Having worked for two decades in the youth service in the 1980s and 1990s, I developed an affinity

for person-centred practices; for me, narrative inquiry encapsulates Rogerian core conditions of person-centred working (Rogers, 1990) and I recognise that Rogers' (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) work has had a profound impact throughout my professional life. Although initially working to establish a client-centred therapeutic approach, so challenging the traditional power dynamics within the realms of psychoanalysis, Rogers' (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) work has found a strong connect with the educational world. His three core conditions of unconditional positive regard, congruence and empathy provide the basis of his respectful and ethical working practices. These, he argues, can be extended to the educational classroom wherein the relationship between educator and learner needs to be one based on equality. Rogers' (Rogers, 1990; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) core conditions create the means for a facilitative climate to be effected in which the learner can find the freedom to fulfil her/ his potentiality. It is the freedom and self-determining aspects of the person-centred approach that draw my attention.

As a youth worker, I employed a Rogerian approach when undertaking generic and counselling-style work with young people, and, within an educational context, I have continued to work respectfully with learners as a way to release the potentiality within the individual (Rogers, 1990, p.130). This person-centred approach lends itself fully to the narrative inquiry framework within which power of the researcher is minimised and the voice of the narrator is not suppressed (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1986); in this way, lived experiences are storied within the context of a safe and respectful 'climate'. Power within the person-centred approach is used creatively to "build relationships based on



cooperation, equality, openness, inclusion and collaboration" (Natiello, 2001, p.59). These qualities are reflected in the construct of belonging, discussed in the literature review, and serve to 'mirror' the content of my study with its processes; that is, in order to reveal articulations of belonging, I chose to work within a dialogic approach that facilitates such emotional responses. In light of the many candid conversations that I have had with research participants, I am persuaded that such a facilitative climate was beneficial to this study; participants explored intimate details to do with family, personal goals, and ruptures within their lives.

The methodological approach of narrative inquiry demands a close working together of researcher and research participant so that the traditional relationship, as experienced within qualitative research, of interviewer and interviewee becomes that of narrator and listener (Chase, 2011, p.423); it challenges traditional power imbalances within the research process. I adopt this methodology as a means to challenge such traditional power imbalances, in keeping with Rogerian principles, and as a way to facilitate participatory research practices. In response to Trowler's (2010) critique of a dearth of the student voice within the literature and by way of adding to the 'consultable record' of the What Works? project (Thomas, 2012) and What Works? 2 (Thomas *et al.*, 2017), my study is located within a methodological framing that privileges the participant as expert in respect of their own lived experiences.

Before moving on, I wish to set out my preferred nomenclature for those with whom I have worked during this research. Within the research literature,

reference is often made to the 'respondent' which Oakley (1981, p. 35) calls a "telling name"; that is, passive. I prefer to use the term 'participant' or 'narrator' since the nature of my study is a participatory endeavour, whereby ideas are co-constructed within the context of the research itself. Where authors and researchers refer to 'respondent' within the literature, I respect the choice of terminology and cite it accordingly; otherwise, the more active terms 'participant' and 'narrator' will be employed. While I do not wish to confuse my reader, I consider there to be mileage in using both terms; 'participant' offers the sense of an active and agentic role whereas 'narrator' becomes more relevant when discussing the authoring of lived experience.

My study is influenced by feminist methodologies which have foregrounded the voice of the research participant over several decades; for example, Burns and Walker (2005, p.67) argue the centrality of "the notion of voice" to feminist methodologies and cites Oakley's (1981) study as an early example of feminist research. I find Oakley's (1981) words to be compatible with my own positioning as researcher:

A feminist methodology. . . requires, further, that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

(Oakley, 1981, p. 58)

This sentiment captures an important aspect of my research in that it highlights, and values, the connectedness and reciprocity that people establish between each other in order to communicate meaningfully. It would seem also to hold many of

the aspects of belonging as discussed in the literature review; in particular, those aspects of coming to know one another, to recognise one another, and to be open to others. Within feminist methodologies the relationship between researcher and research participant is closer, more open, and more personally involved than in traditional qualitative working (Mishler, 1986; Oakley, 1981, 2016), wherein the researcher is prepared to invest her or his own personal identity (Oakley, 1981).

For Oakley (1981) this perspective is key to her being able to uncover the experiences of her first-time mothers; instead of remaining in the traditional role of one who does not respond to participants' questions, for fear of creating bias within, or "contaminating" (p.36), the research process, she notes how she does provide responses to her participants, offering vital details unknown to these mothers-to-be in relation to the childbirth process. The concept of contamination is one that I find resonates with my review of literature for this study. In light of the study HE context with its Widening Participation agenda, FGS can be portrayed as those students who are contributing to a dilution of HE standards, and so contaminating (Burke, 2012) the privileged status of university education. It strikes me that there is a certain synchronicity here between the struggles of feminist methodologies to overcome the traditional objectivity of the scientific method within research and the struggles of the FGS to be seen as positively contributing to the HE student body. My choice of the narrative inquiry methodological framework, therefore, offers a mirroring of my topic with the processes, to afford a sense of connectedness.

Placing my participant at the centre of the process values the expert knowledge that is held in relation to their own lived experience, as opposed to more traditional interview techniques whereby the researcher is seen to be the expert; that is, it is acknowledged that the research process depends not on the naiveté of the participant but on their knowledge and experience (Mishler, 1986, p. 133). Within this perspective the participant is not viewed as “the passive . . . vessel of answers” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 38) but as one who constructs the story, within the context of the relationship with the researcher. For Paget (1983), this constitutes and creates the knowledge that is being offered:

*Knowledge* in in-depth interviews means coming to understand, achieving a resolution of puzzlement not offering a causal explanation. This is a dynamic process in any given interview and a cumulative process over a series of interviews. There is another aspect of the meaning of knowledge used here. Knowledge here means illuminating human experience; the complexity, opaqueness, and mystery of an essentially subjective species.

(Paget, 1983, p.88, original emphasis)

Narrative inquiry privileges knowledge borne of experience and I have been heavily influenced by the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) whose work, based on the ideas of Dewey (1938), focuses on the task of trying to understand experience. Dewey’s (1938) importance of ‘continuity’ is pivotal to the conceptual foundations of Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) working model. In terms of narrative inquiry, the subject has a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere. In this sense, narrative inquiry emphasises the interconnectedness of, and tensions within, issues of context, temporality, people, action, and certainty which become the main players in the narrative thinking

model: "In narrative thinking, *the person* in context is of prime interest" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 32 original emphases), and experiences are understood narratively. Within my study, the storying of lived experiences has been offered narratively in order to reveal the interconnections and tensions inherent within the stories.

The narrative thinking model is conceptualised as "the three-dimensional inquiry space; that is, along temporal dimensions, personal-social dimensions, and within place" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pp.128-129). As a visual, this may take on the aspect of a box. For example, consideration of a statistic, or a statement, is narratively 'unfolded', or opened up, within the 'box' in order to reveal the variety of dimensions contained within it. Such a metaphorical inquiry space complements my own emphasis upon metaphor and appeals to my sense of ecological framing, wherein nested factors, or dimensions, offer myriad influences to contribute to the meaning of experience.

Using the narrative inquiry space to focus upon the FGS in 'context', within the context of their own ecologies, provides a way to 'unfold' the statements, look beyond the negative framing, and begin to consider the lives of FGS as lived. My study, then, using this model, affords the chance to consider the "narrative histories" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.31) of FGS, which become visible within the metaphorical inquiry space; the same premise can be employed to interrogate the construct of belonging. That is, thinking narratively about belonging is contingent with its having a past, present and implied future which

will impact how it is understood by my participants, and by implication, how it is articulated by them.

Privileging the voice of the narrator has implications for how knowledge is located within this study. Knowledge is contested and borne of many ways of knowing; while scientific knowledge is often privileged as legitimated knowledge, lived experience offers a potent source of knowing. Poised in contrast to more positivist, means-end principles, whereby universal, people- and context- free notions are formulated, working within feminist methodologies values the subjective voice of the participant, located in time, place and personal experience (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry foregrounds experience in order to create knowledge from it. Such an epistemological stance is in contrast to the ubiquitous 'survey method' of interviewing which is exposed as a way in which various questioning techniques were upheld as methods to extract 'truths' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler 1986). Critiques of the traditional orthodoxy provide epistemological tensions within the interdisciplinary research landscape, adding to moves already introduced such as the 'interpretive turn' (Geertz, 1973) in the social sciences. While many disciplines working to understand more about their client groups now employ narrative as a way of seeking out what it means to be recipients of particular policy initiatives (Riessman and Quinney, 2005) or what it means to live with specific health conditions (Clark and Mishler, 1992), it is the interpreting of such meanings, and the ways in which this is conducted, that continues to be pivotal to the epistemological status of the resulting research product.

The philosophical underpinning of narrative inquiry is founded on the belief that "language is understood as deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning. Informants' stories do not mirror a world 'out there'. They are constructed creatively, authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (Riessman, 1993, pp. 4-5). That is, narrative inquiry moves away from language merely as a transparent medium, which is more reflective of traditional research approaches. As such, narrative inquiry focuses on 'how' the narrators have constructed their narratives as a way to understanding the 'what' that is expressed (Elliott, 2005). Just as Geertz (1973) emphasises the search for meaning within a social context, the narrative, as product of the co-constructed exchange between narrator and listener, is imbued with the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the context, both temporal and geographical (Usher, 1996), inclusive of the subjectivities of both parties. For instance, Riessman (2008) offers an example of her research with Indian women around childbirth practices and how this was affected by her own white American cultural norms which impacted on how the stories were told to her; it also influenced her interpretation as she depicts 'Sunita' as a childless woman, only to be contacted one year later by Sunita claiming herself to be a "complete woman" (p.42).

Meanings drawn from lived experience are interpreted by narrators and constituted within language. Narrative, posited as the primary way individuals make sense of experience, becomes for Bruner (2006) an organising principle within life, so that he concludes: "In the end, we *become* the autobiographical

narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (p. 131). In turn, narrative inquirers interpret others' interpretations so that the values and beliefs of the researcher need to be made transparent within the interpretation process. Chase (1995) demonstrates how the prevailing social processes to do with gender and class are embedded within her narrators' stories so that she is able to offer the following interpretation: "After all, women from working backgrounds receive little cultural encouragement to be ambitious and plenty of encouragement to work selflessly for others and to think of themselves as inadequate" (p.21). While such a viewpoint may, or may not, represent the voices of her participants, the theoretical positioning of the researcher is able to influence the resulting version of the interpretive process, so that what can best be achieved is 'a' version of it, rather than 'the' version (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p. 141). The concept of positionality is an important aspect of feminist methodologies whereby acknowledgement of the researcher's 'standpoint' provides greater transparency of the research product (Burns and Walker, 2005). Transparency of the interpretive process becomes a key element within narrative inquiry methodology, assisted by critical researcher reflexivity, and, in contrast to aspects of more traditional research which focus on issues to do with the accuracy of the data collected, narrative inquiry seeks to establish the trustworthiness of research processes.

In narrative inquiry, issues of trustworthiness (Riessman, 2008, p.184) replace concerns around 'truth' so that "researchers . . . move away from questions about the factual nature of the narrator's statements. Instead, they highlight the version of self, reality, and experience that the storyteller produces through the telling"



(Chase, 2005, p.657). The focus is on the narrator's voice, the story she/ he has to tell in all its specific detail. In this regard, it is the particularity of the story that is unique and compelling. As researcher, I align myself with Polkinghorne (2007, p.479) who notes that "Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described". In similar vein, Riessman (2008, p.187) highlights that "Narrative scholars would generally agree that a narrative is not simply a factual report of events, but instead one articulation told from a point of view that seeks to persuade others to see the events in a similar way".

Issues of persuasion and coherence are discussed by Riessman (2008) who argues that the writing skills of, say, journalists, are able to convince an audience despite a paucity of evidence, whereas the "traumatized lives" (p.190), such as those of Holocaust survivors, do not necessarily present themselves as internally coherent and consistent. In order to strengthen the persuasiveness of narrative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Riessman, 2008), on-going journaling of thoughts, feelings, and decisions made by the researcher is recommended to demonstrate "a methodical path, documenting claims, and practicing reflexivity (which) strengthens the case for validity" (Riessman, 2008, p.193). As cautioned by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.33), "the more we are aware of the subjectivity involved in data analysis, the more likely we are to see how we are influencing interpretations." I have included reflexive commentary within the Findings and Discussion chapter, influenced by Paget (1983), whose detailed reflexive accounts offer an invitation to her reader to enter into the transcribed texts so that reader

interpretation may also be realised. Opening up of the interpretive process values the multivocality of a text and reinforces the dialogic aspects of research; it makes visible that the version being offered is but one of many, and will have been constructed within a temporal plane, within a particular context. Affirming the empathic response of the reader, Gullestad (1996, in Nielsen, 1999), writing from a literary perspective, talks of having “provide(d) the reader with ample materials for making different interpretations than the ones I have made. The life stories, as well as the social realities that shaped them, are open to future interpretations from new perspectives, and, therefore, open to challenge” (Gullestad, 1996, p. 42, in Nielsen, 1999, p. 49).

The variability of interpretation within narrative research is a part of its multivocality, valuing the differing perspectives of those who seek to make sense of the experiences offered based on their own positioning. In considering the criteria against which qualitative research might be measured, the words of Bochner (2002) are instructive:

In our hearts, if not in our minds, we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft. Somewhere along the line, we became convinced that these qualities were signs of inferiority, which we should not expose. It appeared safer to keep the untidiness of our work to ourselves, rather than run the risk of having our work belittled as ‘unscientific’ or ‘unscholarly’... I wonder what it is we are not talking about when we are talking about criteria? Instead of asking, how can this be true? We could ask, what if this were true? What then?

(Bochner, 2002, pp. 258-259)

Bochner (2002) advocates that it is the effectiveness of the way in which the research helps the reader to understand the phenomena under scrutiny that is key to narrative research; his ideas draw on Freeman (1996). The list of factors which

Bochner (2002) perceives as central to what makes for such a narrative research concludes with the words: "I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean" (p. 263).

Having discussed theoretical and epistemological underpinnings to this study, I wish to privilege, then, the value of participant knowledges, via their lived and told experiences, and my own critical reflexivity as a way of co-constructing meanings drawn from gathered data. In moving forward, I wish to explore the alignment of the methodology, inclusive of narrative analysis and presentational aspects.

#### Storying the research journey

Just as my participants have storied their thoughts and feelings, so too, I move into this section with a view to storying the specific ways in which I have worked with participants within this study. Issues of researcher reflexivity, methodological tension and ethical consideration are woven into the discussions that follow so signalling the connectedness of their positioning within this research approach. Drawing on my reflective and reflexive journaling over the duration of this research process, I offer insights as to my decisions and values, which have necessarily shaped the study. Finally, I consider the analytical framework for the interpretation and presentation of data gathered in preparation for my findings and discussion, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Narrative inquiry foregrounds the voice of the research participant, as narrator, and my choice of this approach is premised on the value I ascribe to participants' voices, to tell their own stories. In seeking aspects to do with personal experience and affective issues around the concept of belonging, I wished to create a research environment in which participants could feel safe and not under pressure to respond to a pre-determined set of questions presented to them. Rather, I wished to establish a respectful way of research working that would explicitly value the participant from the outset and encourage them to talk at length about their lived experiences so that together we might co-construct meaning from them. I wanted to have a glimpse of what it is to be a student, in the existential sense, in the everyday machinations of living, and in the words of those who inhabit the lifeworld of FGS. The dialogic framing of respectful and democratic working is echoed in many of the writings within the literature review (Alexander, 2006; Burke, 2012; Lillis, 2003) and I wished to carry through such values into my methodological framework. To me, the ways of working within narrative inquiry offered the potential for a potent source of insight to inform and guide my knowing about engagement and belonging in the 'here and now', within the lived realities of FGS.

#### Pilot study

As a way of demonstrating the importance I ascribe to the participant voice, I begin here with the pilot study that I conducted with two second year, full-time undergraduates studying on education courses. The pilot study was to have a profound effect upon the subsequent design of this research study influencing

aspects to do with: research population choice; underpinning philosophy of respectful working; significance of the ecological framing of the study; and, methods of data gathering. I will cover each of these in turn before moving on from the pilot study to reveal details of the research study itself.

The pilot study was a chance for me to assess my researcher skills in terms of research design and personal skills and attributes in regard to working with participants within a conversational format. I selected two of my then current students; one was a young Asian woman, the other a 'mature' white man. At this time, I had not fully determined how I might select my research population for the study but I was keen to incorporate diversity in order to reflect the demographic of the student body recruited via the WP agenda. As it transpired, both of the pilot participants offered me the information that they were first in their families to come to university; this is not something that I asked of them but having discussed it within the pilot study, I came to realise that I too had been FGS. Such a notion had not previously occurred to me but when later seeking to finalise my chosen research population, it was to the FGS that I was drawn as a consequence of this pilot study. It seemed fitting that I should relate to my participants in this way and it provided a sense of connect in terms of 'insider' status (Merriam *et al.*, 2001) even though my own undergraduate experience had been undertaken many years before.

I conducted two one-hour meetings with each of my pilot participants. On entering into my first pilot meeting, I recall telling the participant that I felt

anxious, whereupon she responded: "Oh, it's all right. You needn't be"; this served to set the tone for a conversation within which we could both feel safe, in keeping with the philosophy underpinning narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Although I had taught this participant, as student, and talked with her often, I felt the conversation with her developed a new relationship between us; I came to see her in a new light, as a whole person, and not simply as a second year undergraduate student. Such an impression calls to mind the wider potentialities of people, whereby aspects that have been hidden, or in this case, unobserved and unrecognized, become visible, adding to the wholeness that is the person.

As someone who has worked with, and for, people for much of my professional life, I trusted that I did in fact 'recognise' those with whom I worked. However, as a white researcher, even as I focused on this young Asian woman who wears a headscarf, I found myself wondering if I had ever truly looked at her face, considered her wider lifeworld and to what extent I might recognize her without the headscarf. Treacher's (2006) 'ethics of recognition', discussed in the literature review, is not concerned with such demonstrable matching of physical features, but it is about recognizing and working respectfully with difference; for Rogers *et al.* (1999, p. 89) it is about an "emphasis on recognition along with communication as a goal of speaking." It was important, then, that I should be an empathic listener within the narrative process, cognisant of differences between myself and my narrator. This pilot conversation served as a critical incident upon which to

reflect and reflexively take stock of my underpinning philosophy of working for this research study within a person-centred approach.

The content of my pilot study was instructive. For both participants, as full-time students, the upheaval to family life was considerable, and yet both represented very different aspects. As a lone father of two, my male participant had a full itinerary of childcare responsibilities as well as a wide range of social and civic commitments; as a single young woman living at home, my female participant had re-negotiated her whole family lifestyle around her status as student in order that she could study at home without distractions: "I've told the parents. When I'm in the house, don't disturb me... they totally ignore me if they see me until I sit down and say 'You can talk to me now'... It changes their life, my life as a student". This insight reinforced my belief in the importance of taking an ecological approach; to reveal student ecologies as influential factors operating within the lifeworld of the student. I was resolved, therefore, to gather stories from other FGS that might reveal similar underpinning 'assets' (Kinney, 2015). Negative framing of FGS around what they bring to the academic table may be based on the paucity of information that is known about such a demographic; the opportunity to find out more about the lives of a small number of contemporary FGS, within an ecological framework, privileged the complexity of lifeworlds to be storied within the narrative inquiry approach.

Both pilot participants gave generously of their time and I was humbled by their commitment to the task. I used 'trigger' material (FIG 4), to which I refer again

later in this chapter, in the first meeting, as a way of facilitating the talk and for the second meeting, each participant brought along a drawing as a basis for their continued exploration of the topic. I include here the drawing (FIG 1) offered by the young Asian woman as it was she who served to propel me towards the use of more creative strategies in the research study, particularly around the notion of metaphor.

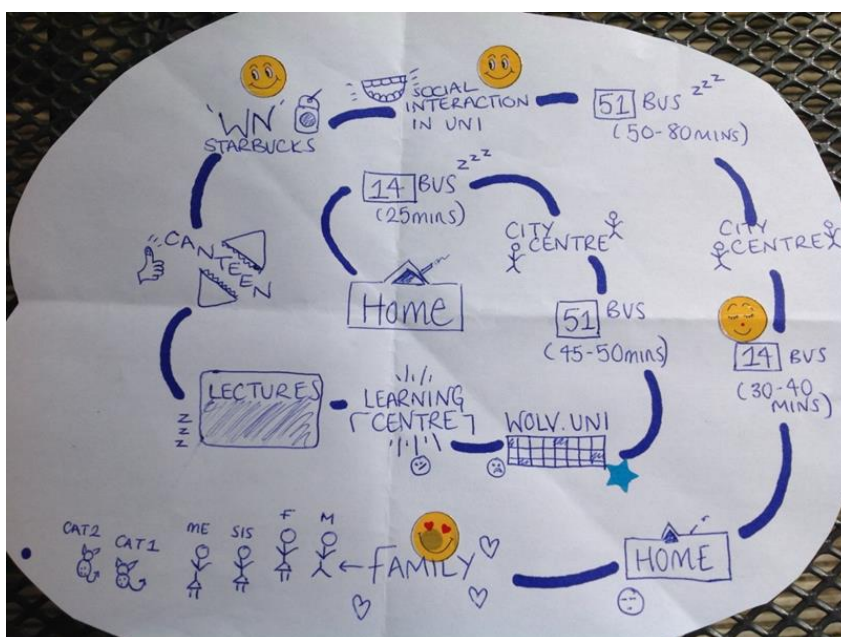


FIG 1: Pilot drawing for pilot meeting 2

The participant was quite specific in her description of the drawing within her storying of her lifeworld: "It's a silent metaphor. My life is a spiral". It was only upon later reflection on my part that I wondered fully about the 'silent' aspect of the metaphor; could it mean that she journeyed into and away from university each time by herself, without company, and so without personal engagement with anyone? Or could it mean that no-one really knew of her long journey each day? Or cared enough to find out?



Regrettably, I did not pursue my thoughts and this was a lesson learned for the research study itself; that is, the interaction is the site of production of the narrative, to be regarded “as a discourse between speakers . . . (in which) the meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent” (Mishler, 1986, pp. 33-34). My omission to ask for clarity, to understand the aspect being offered from the perspective of my participant, and so move on having co-constructed the meaning together, is an aspect that I became more familiar with, and adept at employing, as I moved through my later conversations with my research participants. In terms of the metaphor offered within this pilot study, I became aware of its import only as I reflected on its usage; I realised how metaphor could offer multiple meanings and add richness to the texture of the written fabric.

In pursuit of creative ways to enhance my study, the work of Kara (2015) inspired me to consider the use of additional strategies to reveal the stories of my participants. Within my own teaching and learning at the university, working with undergraduates, I employ a range of tools - role play, simulated exercises, drawings, debates, posters, YouTube clips, fairy stories - to stimulate thought processes in order to engage the imagination of my learners; it seemed a natural step then to augment my research repertoire further to include aspects around metaphor and I detail these later in this section in terms of metaphor-elicitation strategies. It was at this point in my research journey that I began to identify the use of metaphor within academic texts: the work of Young (1990) whose ideas of

the 'unoppressive city' underpin much of this study, and the aspect of the 'metaphorical inquiry space' at the heart of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) model of thinking narratively. Having expounded the considerable benefits of the pilot study in regard to its influences upon my research study, I will move forward in my research story to detail how participants were recruited, and how the research process was enacted in terms of gathering the data.

### Recruitment of research participants

As an academic within the Institute of Education, I knew that many of my students were FGS. In preparing to seek recruits for my chosen research population, my immediate concern was that I would be overwhelmed with students to take part in my research. In light of the negative framing of FGS within the literature, I proposed to 'take all comers' as I was mindful that having identified themselves as FGS, it would be disingenuous of me to decline their offer of help. As it transpired, my initial efforts to recruit participants for the study yielded only two second-year students. I was disheartened. Since I required students who declared themselves as FGS, my selection process was necessarily purposive; that is, my criterion of FGS required that my research participants "satisfy the specific needs in a project" (Robson, 2011, p. 275). The manner in which I sought to recruit was via my staff team; I assembled a short power point presentation and delivered this in a small number of modules which targeted second year students enrolled on courses within pathways inclusive of childhood, family, and community (non-ITT). Staff colleagues delivered the presentation on my behalf a second time when numbers of recruits remained low.

Reflecting on this process in light of the literature review, I am struck by my apparent naiveté in thinking FGS might identify themselves if they are perhaps intent on keeping a low profile (Hardwick, 2014); feeling 'out of place' may militate against public acknowledgment of the positioning. In addition, Parr (1998, p. 92), records that one student asked the researcher, "Are you only interested in students with difficulties?" and I wonder to what extent my own 'marketing' approach may have afforded such a perception. Although I am aware of the negative framing of the FGS within the literature, and how hegemonic discourse might have influenced my own thinking, as well as that of the FGS themselves, I recall offering a positive perspective on my marketing strategy; as FGS myself, I sought to establish affinity with those students in my audience who may also be FGS, as an outward means of legitimatizing the label. Such a sentiment only serves to affirm the negative label, I realise. One of the inherent tensions I have found within this study is the use of such a label. On the one hand, I sought to reveal insights into a specific demographic that was under-researched; on the other, in valuing the individual as a whole person, the use of a label seemed counter-intuitive. Moreover, the low number of recruits may already have demonstrated my having fallen victim to the effects of such labelling at this point in the story.

Fortunately, a fellow Professional Doctorate colleague, teaching on Initial Teacher Training (ITT), within the Institute of Education, demonstrated how research can be a social process; she emailed out to her second year students about

volunteering for my study, and I immediately received six offers of support. In addition, two other non-ITT students were recruited; one had heard my presentation and the other declared an interest in belonging, as part of an essay she was writing, and so I invited her onto the study. Out of my ten initial participants, three dropped out owing to personal circumstances; seven participants remained with me for the duration of the study. Despite my intentions of being able to offer diversity in terms of racial background, ethnicity, and gender, my seven participants were all women, and all but one was white British. As a way of demonstrating the diversity offered by my seven participants, I provide details on the following page (FIG 2) which also include aspects which will have pertained to me as an undergraduate in the 1970s, as a way of signalling my own part within this research process. Diversity was offered in terms of participants' individual lives, couched within personal ecologies, and providing unique lived experiences. Pseudonyms have been chosen by me where participants have not offered their preferred names for inclusion here.

	Lauren	Ellen	Tessa	Chloe	Nadia	Becky	Terri	Researcher
18-21	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Mature		✓				✓		
Living on campus	✓			✓				✓
Living at parental home					✓		✓	
Living in student house			✓					
Living in own home		✓				✓		
A mother		✓				✓		
Employed work		✓			✓		✓	
BME					✓			
White	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Full time	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Part time		✓						
ITT			✓	✓		✓	✓	
Non ITT	✓	✓			✓			✓

FIG 2: Diversity of factors of participants and of researcher

### Engagement with participants

Only one of the participants was known to me. My position as academic posed ethical issues in terms of power relations and the extent to which I might teach and grade students' work, although I am not a part of the ITT programme, and did not teach or grade any second year work pertaining to the non-ITT participants. The work of Brydon-Miller *et al.* (2010), with its emphasis upon power relations, interdependency and the co-generation of knowledge, was instructive in considering ethical issues beyond the consent form; the concept of 'covenantal ethics' as a long-term contract between researcher and participant, for these authors premised on participatory action research, suggested a more ethical

way of working across the duration of the research study. Although I devised a participant information sheet (Appendix 1), and negotiated with participants to sign a consent form (Appendix 2) at the beginning of our first conversation, I reiterated at the beginning of each conversation the ability to re-negotiate the ethical consent issues. In addition, during the digitally-recorded, and transcribed, conversations I can be heard to preambulate some questions, such as: "do say if you do not wish to talk about this but, when you said . . . what do you mean?" Ethical consent represents, therefore, an ongoing priority across the life of the study for although I secured ethical approval from the researched university, the vicissitudes of events and relationships 'along the way' can make for "What once seemed settled and fixed . . . once again a shifting ground" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 175).

In keeping with BERA (2011), I was also keen to remind participants that they could walk away at any point, without penalty. The emotive topic of belonging was one that I was mindful could generate issues of discomfort or embarrassment for participants; the participant information sheet emphasised that I would work respectfully with participants to minimise any such feelings and assure them of the value of their contributions to my study. An example of this is drawn from the first conversation with Lauren in which I diverted the focus of the conversation from campus to the family home, so that loneliness of campus life could be shifted to the appreciation of 'personal space' and 'freedom' which were the perceived benefits for this participant of having moved far away from home. Issues of

appropriateness of questioning and shifting of perspectives are expounded as good practice within the process of an 'active interview':

As interactively warranted, the interviewer encourages the respondent to shift narrative positions, to take different roles, throughout the interview. Asking the respondent to address a topic from one point of view, then another, is a way of activating the respondent's stock of knowledge, of exploring the various ways that the respondent attaches meaning to the phenomenon under investigation.

(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 77)

The question of ethics, therefore, represents a challenging aspect of the research process and one which creates discursive practices; for instance, to consider publication only after follow-up interviews with participants years after the research in order to gauge effects of the original interviews (Bar-On, 1996), or to work with integrity, using 'ethics-in-context', appreciating that it is never possible to predict the impact of research, its risks and its benefits (Gill and Goodson, 2011). Interestingly, Oakley's (2016) return to her original mothers-to-be, thirty-seven years after the initial research, found that one third of her participants had forgotten all details of the study, while the remainder generally had positive recollections of their involvement. In my study, participants have acknowledged that they found the study useful to them although I am unable to assure similar evaluations in the years to come.

### Implementing the research process

Working with each of the seven research participants, I termed our meetings as 'conversations' in order to emphasise that our talks were to be based on an equitable approach to the research process rather than on the basis of a more

traditional question and answer format. I wanted to offer a participatory approach to the study, foregrounding the voices of participants as key to the process. I met with each participant for three conversations, each of which lasted approximately one hour. As a way of enhancing the participatory element, and also inspired by the creative work of Finnigan (2009) whom I cited in the literature review as having noted that “Through creative media voices are made free in their space” (p.148), I chose to include a range of creative strategies designed to elicit the voices of my participants. Over the three conversations, I designed a strategy to cover all aspects of my research inquiry and I offer it below in grid format (FIG. 3); further details are expounded later in this chapter.

Conversation	Focus of conversation	Creative strategies	Examples of technique
1	Engagement with the university	Use of my trigger material (FIG 4)	Emergent questions Casual questions
2	Lifeworld of narrator beyond the university	Use of narrator drawings/ charts	Open questioning; non-lexicals; paraphrasing
3	Articulations of belonging	Photo-elicitation Metaphor-elicitation	Q&A to ‘unpack’ photos Set question to elicit metaphor followed by Q&A Activating narrative production

FIG 3: Design strategy over three conversations



My approach within the first research conversation was to offer 'emergent questions' (Mishler, 1986) or 'casual questions' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), such as, "What's it like for you? As a student?" and "I'd be really interested, erm for you to talk about how, you, erm, connect, you know, with the university. What it's like for you?" Such questions were designed to invite the narrator to talk at length, and to avoid the fragmentary question and answer format of more traditional interviewing techniques. This first conversation focused on looking at how the participant engaged with the university since I felt this to be less threatening and less intrusive than asking about private lived experiences beyond the academic sphere, and besides, the academic sphere was the one which initially provided the link between us. Working without the constraints of a pre-planned schedule, but based upon the 'trigger' material (FIG 4), which I had created upon consideration of the range of connections that might be made with the university lifeworld, I sought to elicit an informal, conversational style of exchange which I had successfully piloted. As such, I adopted a spontaneous questioning approach, affording the opportunity to follow the initiative of my narrator, and so shape the evolving discourse (Paget, 1983) within the embedded topic. This echoed ways of working within a person-centred approach. In addition, I developed a halting way of asking open questions, offering a tentative approach inclusive of pauses - "Okay (pause). So (pause) could you sort of take me through (pause) what it's like (pause) for you as a student (pause) in terms of how you (pause), how you (pause) connect with the university?" (Tessa, C1) - and I employed a certain lightness of tone, at times, as a way to soften my claims to know more (Paget, 1983).

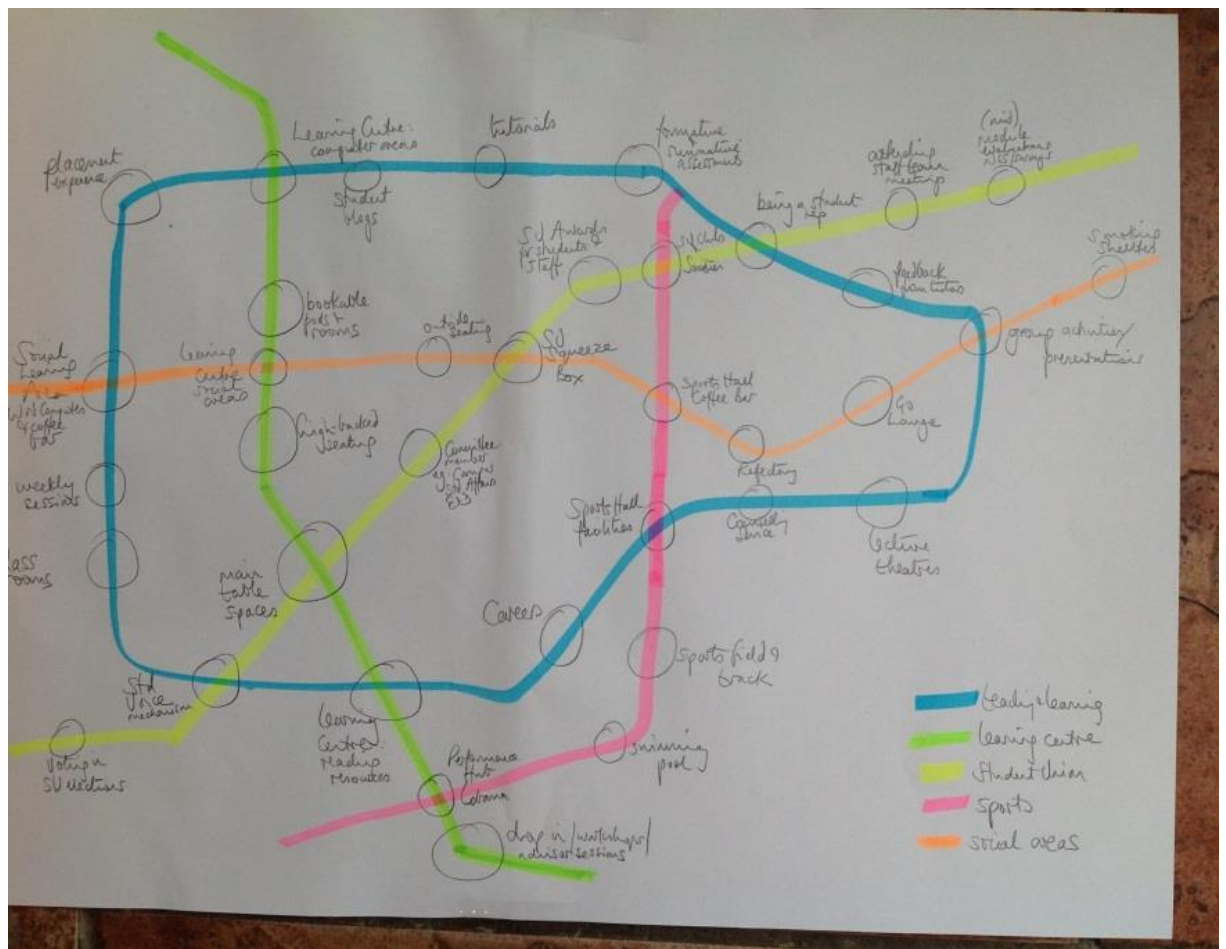


FIG 4: Drawing to accompany conversation 1

The second conversation centred on the lifeworld of the participant outside of the university; that is, the wider ecology of the participant and how it impacted the lifeworld of the student. In the event, only two participants brought along hard copy drawings; others brought some notes on their mobile phones while the remainder did not bring anything. Reflecting on this, I was initially disappointed. I was struck by the difference between the research study and the pilot study, where both pilot participants had produced something for the occasion. In retrospect, I suspect I wanted something to take away with me, like the magpie with her shiny treasure; all participants were able to offer stories of their wider ecologies and that was the purpose of this second conversation. In privileging the

person-centred valuing of the participant, I reminded myself that they were already giving me of their time; what Oakley (2016) discusses as 'the gift' of time, memory and stories.

The third conversation focused on the articulations of belonging voiced by my participants. I wished to enable participants to talk about their experiences, thoughts and feelings; the creative strategies, using photos and metaphors, were a means to enable such talk. The intangible nature of belonging, as a construct, carries with it the potential for different meanings for different people so that the combined use of photos and metaphors, to elicit and facilitate discussion around a topic that ordinarily may not readily find expression, added a creative originality to this study. The strategies were designed to afford an empowering of the participant, just as Finnigan (2009) had found creative means to 'free' the voices of her participants. The photos were selected and contributed by the participants, usually being displayed via their mobile phones; the metaphors were elicited specifically. I saw these creative strategies as a means of expanding the participatory element of the study.

I used elements of both photo- and metaphor elicitation methods, and I offer here a justification of their use; I begin with the former. Photo-elicitation methods (Kara, 2015) have been used within research to elicit understandings within a range of sensitive and abstract topics: teenage sexuality (Allen, 2011); homelessness (Packard, 2008); and Black middle class male youth (Allen, 2012). Using photographs to literally make visible those aspects of belonging that may

not be readily articulated within a verbal commentary, I wanted to discover how belonging is 'seen' or 'felt', on a personal and social level; or as Allen (2011, p. 501) notes: "to reveal its contours". The photographs were used to represent what belonging meant to my participants; they had been invited to bring along photographs or images, taken by them or acquired by other means, which 'spoke' to them of belonging, and student belonging. Initially I had anguished over ethical considerations to do with ownership, and subsequent possible publication, of the images but since I wished to utilise them solely as a means to elicit narrators' stories, I did not attempt to procure them; the images remained in the ownership of the participants, although several participants did enquire if I would like them. Since many of the photographs presented to me were of family and friends, I did not choose to pry too closely into this private domain although I did ask questions, such as "I note you are in the centre of this photo. Is that significant do you think?" but responses varied in their level of detail and sometimes the participant had moved on to the next image on the mobile phone before I had completed my wonderings; privileging the voice of the participant, I moved on with them. In addition, one participant brought along an artefact to talk about and this proved useful as a 'concretised' object to help with co-constructing articulations of belonging; it afforded me the chance to become Holstein and Gubrium's (1995, p. 39) "active interviewer (who) does far more than dispassionate questioning; he or she *activates narrative production*" (original emphases). I include an image of the artefact (FIG 5) within the Findings and Discussion chapter.

Offering a picture in words was afforded by the use of metaphor-elicitation. The significance of metaphor was premised on my pilot study, as discussed earlier in this chapter. I employed aspects of the metaphor-elicitation method (Fletcher, 2013), in the third conversation, as a way to further enable participants to offer their articulations of belonging. Fletcher (2013) discusses her “fascination with the ebb and flow of verbal processes of making meaning and the role that these processes play in the formation and reformation of individual and shared understanding” (p.1551). Since the focus of my study was to uncover meanings around belonging, and how such meanings might be articulated via the voices of research participants themselves, the novelty of this method attracted my attention. In my search for metaphors, I asked: “Think for a moment what it feels like to belong. If I were to ask you to think about student belonging, and describe it as something else, what would you describe it as?” Once having been offered a metaphor, I was then able to ask further questions, such as “Where in the boat are you?” This aspect of the data gathering provided an unexpected fun element to this third conversation as we moved towards the conclusion of our formal research arrangement. The participant’s creativity came demonstrably to the fore as she searched for, and selected, a metaphor. Together, we created meaning from it by means of a question and answer format, up until this time actively avoided within the narrative inquiry approach, but now encouraged as a way of ‘unpacking’ the metaphor to elicit understanding of the construct of belonging. This conversation was the final one of the data gathering process. I thanked my participants for their generosity of time and for the privilege of having allowed me into their storying of lived experience. They offered their thanks too; for some the

process had offered a chance to reflect on a range of aspects of their lives and to engage in a self-reflexive stance (Oakley, 2016).

### Methodological tensions

The benefits to participants of talking within research interviews is well-documented (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1990; Oakley, 1981, 2016) although the possibilities for harm and upset are also acknowledged (Elliott, 2005; Lieblich, 1996). In her research with divorcees, Riessman (1990), herself a divorcee, talks of her being able to develop a 'responsive relationship' with her participants, but that the research had an effect on her; I document an incident within my Findings and Discussion chapter where I, as researcher, was similarly affected by the research content. Empathic understanding, as part of a person-centred approach, is an expected reaction to respectful working and Paget's (1983, p. 86) "mutual search for understanding", in her study seeking to discover how a woman had become an artist, would argue that the ability to respond empathically is key: "Her painting and her mother's death are linked . . . There is that immediate association . . . I notice her association and I suspect she notices my noticing" (p.81). The awareness to be able to notice, or to recognise, the participant's storyline is an ethical issue, I would argue, reflecting Rogers' (1990) focus on the attitudes of the listener rather than the skills set.

The production of the narrative within the interaction between narrator and listener offers uncertainty and risk to both. According to Riessman (1990), the narrator has the responsibility of the 'teller's problem', that is, the requirement to

make sense of their experience in light of the interviewer's questioning, while the researcher has to respectfully 'work' with whatever story is offered. For both parties, then, the unpredictable nature of what may arise can reflect what in educational terms has been described as 'unsafe journeys' (Cousin, 2006) within a 'liminal' space (Land and Meyer, 2010); or what Riessman (1990, p. 119) has noted as the "unspeakable." The use of creative strategies, with open-ended outcomes, can also offer uncertainty, where work can be uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking (Kara, 2015). For me, the person-centred valuing of my participants and my years of youth service working, and working with adults within education, have allowed me to feel relatively at ease with such situations; in turn, I have felt confident to affirm the capacity of the participant and to nurture the recognition of her potentiality, in a Rogerian sense.

Considering the benefits to research participants in a practical sense, my participant information sheet noted that insights into the research process might be gained by taking part in my study; this was identified since I was aware that third year undergraduates would complete their own research project. For some of my participants, this practical outcome was realized and I was told about how they would be able to relate to their own research participants now they had experienced it themselves; for others, the opportunity to work through meaning-making so experiencing a kind of therapeutic process (Elliott, 2005) may have offered practical benefits in other ways.

The ethics of working within research that will benefit both the researcher and the participant is an important aspect for consideration. As researcher, I wished to avoid the “usual pattern of ‘hit and run’ educational research” (Zeichner, 1995, p.157) and the often-practised approach of researchers as “colonisers . . . (who) collect their stories to disappear without a word . . . This has been experienced by many indigenous communities as another form of dispossession” (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2011, p.390). The participatory aspects of my research have actively sought to overcome such a tendency. In addition to privileging the voices of participants and to encouraging them to bring images and ideas to the conversations, I also invited them to meet with me one final time, as a follow-up conversation; each one lasted about forty-five minutes. I met individually with six of the seven participants in order to: discuss meanings taken from our exchanges; demonstrate my intentions for how I wished to present their voices; and, provide a forum in which they could consider my suggestions, offer comments and challenges, and clarify any further ambiguities. I premised such ideas on the notion of “interim research texts” offered in the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 133), whereby the sharing and negotiation of gathered data with participants is a pre-requisite to the production of the final research text. For me, this aspect of the study sought to enhance a participatory feel to the research, add to the ethical ways of working, and to validate the contributions made by participants in an explicit and meaningful way.

I emailed to participants a written summary of their three conversations to provide a basis for our talk. Since we had met for approximately three hours in total, I did



not feel it appropriate to send transcribed details of all three hours. Rather, I extracted main points that I wished to use in my findings and I produced the words of participants, as spoken, and arranged them in ways that I hoped they may be agreeable as a way of presentation. The lateness of this conversation with one participant afforded me the chance to show her what I had written in readiness for the Findings and Discussion chapter; I had printed it out for her and she was unequivocal in her delight of what I had written and asked if she might keep it. The follow-up conversation was also used as a time to 'catch up' on what had happened since our three research conversations, and to provide an ending to our research relationship. Endings constitute one of the ethical dimensions of working with people and can represent a loss of relationship for both participant and researcher; I have felt saddened by losing contact with those who have now moved on to future career paths. I have thanked my participants verbally and in writing (Danchev and Ross, 2014) as a way of offering a ritual ending to the research process.

The responsibility of engaging ethically with participants in the research process is examined in depth by Miller (1996) who concludes that "Interview-based research affords people the opportunity to explore themselves, to increase their awareness, to find meaning, to be understood, and to be understood within the context of a relationship" (p.133). Such a viewpoint is reflected in the work of Case (2007), and I am reminded of the beginnings of my own journey into the topic of student engagement and belonging, where "engagement can be considered to represent a connection in the context of a relationship which a student desires or expects to

belong to" (Case, 2007, p.120). The 'context of a relationship' has been, then, for me, a key element of my research work. I am mindful that, as researcher, I was also entering into 'the context of a relationship'; I too have been the recipient of Miller's (1996) words and this reinforces the need for me to include myself within this narrative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), in terms of both process and content. Throughout the research process I encountered methodological tensions which have raised issues of ethical ways of working within the narrative inquiry approach. While the voices of the narrators are privileged, issues of anonymity and confidentiality can present difficulties and much has been written about the vulnerability of research participants, especially those within narrative research (Bakan, 1996; Chase, 1996; Polkinghorne, 2010; Riessman, 2008), where private information can be made public. As a way of considering these tensions, I offer reflexive commentary on three aspects within my study, to do with: transcribing, collaboration and ownership, and conventions of writing.

The transcribing of audio files presented itself as a methodological tension in my study. Many researchers claim the importance of transcribing their own work as a way to establishing the first level of analysis (Mishler, 1999; Price, 1999; Riessman, 1993). Although I succeeded in completing one hour of transcription, it was labour-intensive; as a full-time academic member of teaching staff, I could not find the necessary time. Speaking with fellow researchers, I was happily persuaded that paying someone else to do the job of transcribing was perfectly feasible. Repeated readings of the transcripts have been accompanied by my listening, simultaneously, to the audio tapes; in this way, I have endeavoured to

check transcription processes and to enter into the level of analysis deemed necessary to establish academic rigour within my work. As part of the dialogic process within narrative inquiry is to invite the reader into the narrative text, transcriptions were provided without their having been 'tidied up'; that is, they contain hesitations, pauses, non-lexicals (Riessman, 1990) such as 'uh huh', repetitions, and false starts in order that the mood of the conversation is as accurately conveyed as possible (Paget, 1983; Riessman, 1990, 1993, 2008). This can offer challenges to a readership which may favour a more 'tidied up' version (Standing, 1998). Since the meaning of the narrative is co-constructed within the interactional event itself (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), researcher 'utterances' (Mishler, 1999) are also included within my research extracts; the way in which a question or interjection can direct the flow of talk is significant in coming to understand how a narrative has been created (Paget, 1983). The requirement to offer such detail can result in long extracts of text where the integrity of the narrator can be more fully assured since words are not "fractured" (Riessman, 1993) but where the potential to be identified is more pronounced if certain aspects remain unchanged (Riessman, 2008). Within my study, I have offered large amounts of text but have been circumspect in keeping personal features to a minimum; where this has been impossible, I have chosen to omit the finer detail.

A further methodological tension arose in regard to the aspect of ownership of the finished product. Having promoted the participatory nature of the study, I grappled with ethical ways to work collaboratively, and equitably, despite knowing that my resulting product sought to bring me academic reward. In terms of

collaboration, I can relate to Mauthner and Doucet (1998) who note that the practicalities of time, and time frames, can work to preclude the intentions of researchers who seek to involve participants actively in all aspects of the research; in addition, not all participants wish to be involved. My initial aim had been to employ “interim research texts” (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000, p. 133) as a way of affirming the voices of my participants within the interpretive process, but these required an iterative moving between the research data and the finished product. While I agonised over the extent of the transcribed summary sent to participants before the follow-up conversation, only two admitted to having read it; the remainder acknowledged a cursory skimming of the document but otherwise they were happy to discuss aspects within the follow-up conversation itself. I had considered sending the three hours of audio files but since this would have necessitated my purchasing USB sticks on which to store the information, and send them through the post, I decided against such an action. The possibility of their becoming available to others, so causing embarrassment to my participants, was an issue (BERA, 2011); in addition, hearing their own voices may have dampened participants’ enthusiasm to continue within the research study, and I did not wish to precipitate such a reaction. I take some comfort from my agonising in the words of Oakley (2016, p. 208) who notes: “I debated it at the time, but in the end I faint heartedly withdrew from the challenge of discussing with 55 women the use I decided to make of their stories. Perhaps the notion of the gift *is* helpful here, since giving is generally not conditional on the uses that the receiver makes of the gift (original emphasis).” The ‘gift’, however, mentioned earlier in this section, seems a rationalisation on the part of Oakley (2016) in this

instance, although an expedient one. The uses made of the stories, as in issues of representation, are key aspects of ethical working within narrative inquiry; Oakley (2016) maintains that the aspect of shared interpretation for the final product remains, however, a topic of debate and an unresolved issue, especially within feminist research.

Issues of ownership and authority are taken up by Chase (1996, 2011) who shares concerns around working in partnership with participants within feminist working but concludes that it is she who chooses to take ultimate responsibility for interpretations made from her research; if the researcher has invited collaboration as part of the process, it is still the researcher who carries the authority of ownership. Chase (1996) attests to the time constraints imposed by what she terms “professional pressures” (p. 48) and I am in agreement with such a stance in regard to my own study. While I have endeavoured to negotiate the findings I wish to present, in ways I wish to present them, this exercise would have needed far greater time commitment on the part of both me and my participants. If, however, participants had offered alternative readings of the texts, I would have sought to represent their voices as part of a multivocal interpretation; in the event, participants expressed approval of my intended ways of using the stories and I accept ownership of the resulting product.

The finished work, however, is a product of the academic lifeworld, with its adherence to conventions of writing, and this too offers an ethical dimension to work based on the everyday, conversational voices of participants (Standing,

1998). Maintaining the power of the written text, Standing (1998, p.189) notes that “we take the women’s private words into the public world of academia” where they are then required to be theorized in terms of wider “academic and theoretical debates” (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p.141). My study is a product of such conventions although, since it uses participants’ articulations of belonging, the everyday voices remain in part; however, it is my selection of their words that is privileged. In recognition of feminist methodological principles, I have prioritised the need to work responsibly to re-present narrators’ voices as a way of focusing upon my accountability to my narrators (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The hegemonic forces of HE in terms of academic writing echo the calls of mis-recognition of non-traditional student voices discussed by Burke (2012), in the literature review, and provide continued dilemmas for the researcher, myself included, as to how research might reasonably be presented; to be measured against the “ideal-student subject” (Burke, 2012, p. 116) and establish conformity as a way to seek belonging to the academic community, or to work to criteria that might serve to ‘move’ a reader to understand the phenomenon under scrutiny (Bochner, 2002). I have endeavoured to take a middle path.

I have outlined the practical aspects of my methodological framing of this study and examined tensions which have raised issues of ethical consideration. Moving now to detail my analytical framework, I discuss aspects that shape the interpretation of my data and the way in which I present it to my reader within the Findings and Discussion chapter.

## Analytical framework

There is no one approach to narrative analysis (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Researchers have developed a range of ways to 'unpack' the narrative and many refer to the seminal work of Labov and Waletzky (1967) who determine the function of structural clauses within a text. The ordering of these temporal clauses offers a format which lays bare the organisational structure of the text; it is used by Riessman (1990, 1993) as a way of 'parsing' the spoken words into lines of text, rather than offering 'chunks' of text in traditional prose format. The difficulty, however, of locating such functional clauses within all narratives is problematic (Riessman, 1993) and more suited to short, temporal storied accounts. My narrators' extended storying does not lend itself to such analysis although an appreciation of this structural model allowed me to become aware of how meanings were interwoven into the fabric of the narrative. It is the focus upon meaning that has driven my research; the ways in which belonging are afforded meaning by my narrators and the ways in which they choose to articulate such understandings of belonging.

While structural elements can help to define the narrative format, I am interested in a more holistic rendering of narrative, of how meaning can be seen to be constructed within such a text. As such, I am influenced by the work of Paget (1983) who emphasises the need to offer full details of the narrative text, as a "prosodic system.....(which) preserves the dynamic construction of talk" (Paget, 1983, p.87). For me, this is an important facet of the interpretation process as it provides a more authentic re-presentation of the text, offering the reader the

means to enter into the interpretive process (Mishler, 1999). I have chosen, then, to offer some narrative excerpts in full prose format where I have felt that the reader requires the detail in order to enter into the event. This is in keeping with my focus upon an holistic view of the non-traditional student; that is, a focus on the 'whole person.'

In analysing my own data, I have listened endlessly to the digitally-recorded conversations of my seven participants to supplement appreciation of the transcribed words. I am drawn then to Riessman (1993) when she declares:

. . . repeated listening to tapes sensitized me to subtleties of language that I never was aware of before, and certainly never attended to in previous transcripts – intonation contours, rising and falling pitch, pauses and discourse markers (well, and, so, nonlexical expressions like "uh") that, Gee argues, sets off stanzas in a narrative.

(Riessman, 1993, pp.50-51)

As such, in some parts of my presentation of data, I have chosen to use the presentation offered by Gee (1985), based on oral aspects of the spoken word and employed by researchers (Mishler,1999; Riessman, 1990, 1993) as an alternative means of 'parsing' the original spoken word. In this format, lines of text are determined by the changes in the narrator's pitch and intonation rather than the function of a clause, usually resulting in shorter lines, so emulating more closely the actual conversation itself. In this way, the reader can be drawn into the tension and mood of the narrative and so get a 'feel' for the moment of co-constructed meaning-making in the context of the conversation. This is the basis of Mishler's (1999) study which uses Gee's (1985) units of analysis to provide



transcripts within his text, showing how the “fusion of form and content” (Mishler, 1999, p. 20) is explicated to offer an interpretation of the narrators’ stories.

The units of analysis can be additionally ‘grouped’ forming stanzas so breaking down the text still further. I chose to employ this method of textual presentation for some of my narrators’ shorter narratives and the metaphors that are offered as articulations of belonging; the method is designed to enhance more poetic modes of analysis (Edwards, 2015; Etherington, 2007; Riessman, 1993). The poetic structure builds on the use of stanzas, where “a series of lines on a single topic . . . have a parallel structure and sound as if they go together by tending to be said at the same rate and with little hesitation between lines” (Riessman, 1993, p. 45) and the parsing of words based on Gee (1985). The resulting texts do not offer the whole account of what was said (Riessman, 1990, 1993); researcher utterances (Mishler, 1999) are omitted to improve the flow and style of the stanza format and deletions of some narrator expressions are designed to offer a more succinct re-presentation. The resulting presentation, via poetic stanzas of narrators’ voiced words, is designed to provide an analysis of the stories offered and contribute to the interpretation of what has been told.

The aesthetic appeal of the poetic structure is evidenced, for me, within Etherington (2007, p. 612) whose short text by ‘William’ offers a simplicity that ease of reading alone cannot account for. Similarly, Edwards (2015) translates the written stories of nursing students into poetic form so that it “tells a story and connects the reader to an audience through the expression of emotions or

descriptions of behaviour” (p.37). It is the appeal of this simplicity that draws me to use this poetic structure, whereby metaphorical language and affective dimensions of the talk can find expression. Despite its omission of full conversational factors, I employ this method of analysis to offer narrators’ articulations of belonging within my presentation of findings, to draw attention to ways in which intangible concepts, such as belonging, might find expression and so be better understood.

Within my study, the use of metaphor is designed to add texture to the narrative research, so that the articulations of belonging might draw in the reader, creating mood and verisimilitude of the moment. In addition, it reflects the value of language that constitutes reality. The work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argues that “metaphor allows us to conceptualise one thing in terms of something else that we understand more readily” (p.61) but that the use of metaphor is more than mere language used for descriptive purposes; metaphor constitutes our ways of knowing and acting. The ways in which we think and function in the world, according to these authors, are based on a conceptual system that is metaphorical in nature; everyday speech is replete with metaphorical expressions which is reflective of the underlying metaphorical concepts that structure our world-view. As an example, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) use the conceptual metaphor ‘argument is war’ to demonstrate the many lexical phrases that are commonplace in talking about arguments where the conceptual understanding of war is overlaid on the topic; for instance, “your claims are indefensible”; “he shot down all of my arguments” (p. 4). This is seen as a ‘conventional’ conceptual metaphor, which

finds expression in the day-to-day speech of a population which has a shared culture; the structure of an argument has a similar structure to war, wherein positions are taken, and strategies employed.

In a study by Kochis and Gillespie (2006), the metaphorical linguistic expressions within conversations of college students were analysed in order to derive three underlying metaphorical concepts - life is a journey, the problem is a barrier/maze, and the self is divided - informing the students' viewpoints around interpersonal conflict. These researchers were able to demonstrate how, over time, students changed the way in which they used the underlying conceptual metaphors to exhibit changed viewpoints and behaviours: "Identifying conceptual metaphors, then, cannot only show how language users make sense of their lives, but also how social norms condition their thinking and make certain formulations of experience personally legitimate" (Kochis and Gillespie, 2006, p.568). For these researchers, applying this lens of analysis was able to shed light on how the cognitive functioning of these students, based on the metaphorical structuring of their worldview, had changed.

It follows, then, that changes to conceptual metaphors may have the potential to "change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, pp.145-146). As an example drawn yet again from Lakoff and Johnson (2003), 'love is madness' as a conceptual metaphor suggests that one may not need to do anything to maintain the relationship whereas 'love is a collaborative work of art' would suggest an

approach of cooperation, sensitivity and patience. What these authors describe as 'entailments' – those assumptions and characteristics associated with the different elements within the metaphor – are necessarily changed when the metaphor changes. If the metaphor is adopted by the individual, or becomes so embedded within a culture that it affects the majority of peoples, then attitudes and behaviour can change. Use of such metaphors to reveal a nuanced articulation of belonging is in keeping with the intimacy and personalised nature of metaphors used by research participants to inject emotion into the research study, and to offer understandings of abstract concepts that are difficult to frame within everyday language (Carpenter, 2008).

Within the parameters of my own research study, I use the metaphors elicited from research participants, as well as those metaphorical linguistic expressions that are naturally employed within the conversations, to glean a better understanding of the concept of belonging. The past experiences and cultural norms of my participants will partly determine the meaning of the metaphors used (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 142) and I am reminded that this will apply to myself also, as researcher. In order to show how participants' metaphors may be a product of their own ecologies and lived experiences, I offer within these pages not only the metaphors that are elicited but excerpts from the narrative conversations that serve to 'unpack' some of the past experiences that may be seen to contribute to the metaphorical understandings. Entailments, those characteristics and assumptions drawn from the metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson,

2003), offered by my narrators, are examined in order to reveal the understandings that are articulated in relation to the abstract notion of belonging.

This chapter has provided a theoretical basis for my methodological choice of narrative inquiry. It has also detailed the implementation of my study, introducing the narrators who take centre stage within this participatory research, and ways of working to uphold ethical and respectful practices. I have provided an analytical framework to show how narratives have been re-presented within this study and how interpretations have been offered, couched in wider theoretical frames and tempered by my critical reflexivity. The following chapter is a Prologue which serves to draw the reader into the interpretive space before encountering the Findings and Discussion chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Prologue**

Within the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation, Pakman (2003) outlines the theatrical genesis of the Greek god Hermes, as Prologus, the actor who was charged with:

capturing the benevolence of the audience . . . presenting something the actors themselves did not know, nor would they know even upon the unfolding of the drama, something that was absent from the drama. Hermes thus representing what was absent in the presentation of the actors, was making what in French is called an 'explicitation' and in English an 'interpretation'

(Pakman, 2003, p. 109)

The stories that are about to unfold have been co-constructed with me, the researcher, during this narrative study. They offer a range of viewpoints, a variety of lived experiences, and an illustration of how one topic can be discursively constructed through the prism of unique lifeworlds. The narrative storying of experiences has taken me on a journey, a journey in which I have become embroiled and persuaded to appraise my own thoughts and feelings around issues of engagement and belonging. In presenting this section as prologue, I position myself as actor within this study. While the narrators will story their experiences of belonging, encapsulated within individual ecologies, I shall also have a part to play as reflexive researcher and re-presenter of wider theoretical frames. As an interpretation of what is to come, I have composed this section before close scrutiny of narrative findings; it offers a first level of interpretation, an impression, and a 'sense' of what it might mean.

To begin, I offer the context within which this research is located. Storying students' ecologies of belonging is located within an ecological systems framework

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which offers a non-linear approach to the topic and echoes the complexity focus offered by Zepke (2011) on the subject of student engagement. The myriad of variables that impacts each student's ecology bears witness to the richness of experience articulated by each narrator, and starkly identifies the individuality of such lived experience. The inquiry, then, into how belonging is articulated and experienced by each narrator lays bare the contested nature of the concept and the variety of ways in which it may be understood. Applying an ecological lens is instructive in affirming the diversity of the phenomenon. Drawing links with the natural world, "diversity means strength, and monoculture means weakness" (Braungart and McDonough, 2009, p. 121). Failure to adapt and change to prevailing conditions can mean the elimination of species whereas diversity attests to the ability of species to inhabit the same ecosystem within different 'niches', "the term scientists use to describe species' various zones of habitation and resource use within an ecosystem" (Braungart and McDonough, 2009, p. 121).

It is interesting to pursue this analysis still further. If belonging is conceived of as a specific set of institutional practices, and is 'provided for' in a singular manner, then diversity is unacknowledged and denied its significance in terms of strengthening the phenomenon. As an example, since the concept of belonging is linked to issues of well-being, and in turn to nurturance, it is not unreasonable – for the sake of offering an analogy within the natural world - to envisage belonging as a food source. If food is available in limited ways, at limited times, and in limited places, it is not difficult to foresee problems in sustaining the

nourishment of a population. However, if a more widely dispersed system of food availability were introduced, then greater numbers of the population might reasonably be nourished more readily. So, then, re-imagining belonging in all its diverse connotations and recognising a multiplicity of 'niches' for how it might be experienced may afford a way forward; a concept of 'dispersed belonging' where creative and innovative ways might be fashioned, by students and institution alike, in order to acknowledge the ever-changing contexts of needs and preferences of all those who inhabit the university lifeworld.

As academic and researcher, I inhabit the university lifeworld and it is to my own articulations and experiences of belonging that I now turn, since they unavoidably influence my initial interpretation of the study at this juncture, although I appreciate that critical researcher reflexivity is required without the burgeoning indulgence that can be a product of such a reflexive stance (Usher, 1996). As FGS myself, I have experienced an affinity with the narrators of this study and have been humbled by what they have imparted in our meetings. Indeed, on one occasion, I was overcome with emotion and the conversation faltered; Riessman (1990) warns of such effects upon the researcher but I did not envisage it would affect me in such a way. The narrator, I recall vividly, was talking of the support she enjoys from her family members, despite their not knowing anything about the academic world and its practices; as an undergraduate, my own family support disintegrated in my final year and painful memories came flooding back to me, much in the way Sagan (2008) talks of emotionally-charged spaces. The young narrator waited for me to compose myself and we continued. I did not



experience embarrassment and neither, it seemed, did she. For me, this episode is retained as a precious moment, cathartic in its nature and cementing a trust between myself and the research participant.

Trust is an important quality in order to elicit meaningful exchanges between people and Riessman (1990) argues that the more the interviewee is able to trust the interviewer, the more depth can be offered within the narrative. In the episode noted above, it was I, the researcher, who experienced a sense of trust in the research participant; it left me feeling emotionally 'held' (Josselson, 1996) in the moment and I agree with Josselson's (1996) comments that it is this very feeling that is required by our students within the teaching-learning process in order that the joining together of intellect and affect, for productive learning, can be realised. I begin to wonder to what extent my own sense of belonging to the research process was forged within that moment. The participant acknowledged, by her respectful waiting, that I had engaged with her storyline and noted its significance (Paget, 1983) and, in the moment, we both were recognised by the other. Within interview relationships, Rogers *et al.* (1999, p. 85), building on the work of Freeman (1996), note that "in speaking, a person's aim is to be recognized, not simply to communicate". In terms of belonging to the wider institutional organism, however, I tend to remain at the margins, not unlike Ahmed's (2011) migrant whose positioning denotes an ambivalent status.

As an FGS undergraduate, my belonging came from friendships and an exhaustive sporting schedule, and while I may recall insecurities around social class and

wealth, my campus university quickly became my home and I look back with fondness to my undergraduate days. As a newly-appointed academic member of staff, however, I recall feeling 'fraudulent' and fearful of being 'found out'; I can relate then to Hardwick's (2014) migrant who wishes to keep a low profile. My membership of the academic realm, or at least my introduction to it, came upon entry onto the doctoral study programme; only then did I feel I had somehow 'arrived'. For me, institutional belonging is connected to research activity and the kudos of academic publication, while my personal-social affiliations are to my staff team where I find strength and support but where relationships largely remain working ones rather than those borne of close friendship. Within my own ecology, belonging relates strongly to place and to feelings of security and warmth, whereas close friendships are few. I admire those who have large networks of friends but time has become a sparing commodity over the years so that time for family has taken precedence. Such an insight reminds me that belonging is a shifting concept; it is not static. As an undergraduate and woman without children, I had a vast array of friends and belonging to this network sustained me in times of sadness and in times of joy.

Sustainability is perhaps another facet of belonging that might usefully be interrogated. In an ecological sense, the interdependence of organisms and species is key to the success of the ecosystem. Viewing the university as the ecosystem, it is important that each person affiliated to it plays her/ his part in maintaining it; for instance, students study and achieve a qualification. In order for this to happen, systems of teaching-learning, support, and sustenance are

required. However, as argued above, the element of diversity stimulates the production of an array of needs, and of required corresponding responses to those needs, and as documented by Kahu (2013), the working practices of the HE institution need to adapt to the requirements of a diverse contemporary student demographic. Universities today are fast becoming businesses in their own right and the work of Braungart and McDonough (2009) proposes how using the model of nature might usefully offer a more sustainable approach to the existence of human industry: "Industries that respect diversity engage with local material and energy flows, and with local social, cultural, and economic forces, instead of viewing themselves as autonomous entities, unconnected to the culture or landscape around them" (p.122). I would argue that the notion of interdependence is not unlike that of belonging; it binds people together in a way that can be mutually beneficial and provides a sustainable network of support. In this sense, belonging is a relational concept, and not an entity in itself. In addition, it does not require people to become like others and relinquish their individuality (Young, 1990) but emphasises the co-existence of peoples within their environment. Belonging then might be conceived as something far broader than a human connection within an institution, but with a locality, a region, and to a future in which the institution has a sustainable part to play.

The concept of belonging appears then to be slippery, fluid, changing, and intangible. Caught within an academic landscape of targets and measurements, it is difficult to imagine how such a concept might be evidenced, or measured. However, the narrators within this study have grappled with its parameters and

articulated what it means to them. For many, the notions of belonging and student belonging would seem necessarily different; the former tugs at the heartstrings of family and memory while the latter is more pragmatic and forward-facing. Such a summary is perhaps instructive at this stage for it demonstrates the potentialities of these narrators as committed and determined learners, keen to navigate the HE system as best they can; they have something to prove and that is to themselves, and to their families. In emulating the tautological mode of expression often used by Ahmed (2012), I might argue that success is what belongs to them and what belonging may afford them as the chance to succeed, in whatever guise it may be experienced, and articulated.

On the basis of my conversations with narrators, I find it is the determination to succeed that has been identified as a main constituent of being FGS within this study. Far from the deficit framing within existing literature, the aspect of 'carrying the flag' for the family, as the first in the family to go to university, provides a weighty responsibility and a personal challenge. These narrators illuminate their determination, their deep engagement with the process of learning, and their fortitude as they come across barriers; barriers that need to be, and can be, overcome (Parr, 1998). This attitudinal disposition to work to overcome barriers to success is reflected in Parr's (1998) study of women returners to education and also within an asset-based approach where learner strengths are acknowledged and built upon (Kinney, 2015). In the same way as the narrative format is premised on a 'complication action' and a 'resolution' (Labov and Waletzky, 1967), highlighting a disjuncture, or something having happened, so too does this

prologue highlight a disjuncture; a disjuncture in the 'standard story' (Abma, 1999) of the FGS.

The narrators' stories, which follow, identify learners who are highly motivated to succeed despite their unfamiliarity with the HE processes of learning, and despite negative framing of their academic attributes. Like the migrant, who arrives in a land having faced endless challenges and hardships along the way, is determined to build a future life for her/himself and family, so too, the FGS arrives within HE having had to overcome obstacles within the educational sphere, and within personal spheres of normative social and cultural expectations. Such strengths can go unnoticed, and unsolicited, in the realm of the university where traditional ways of working are imbued as the "organisational context" (Abma, 1999, p. 183); where academic staff are constrained by time to effect innovative changes to reflect emerging needs, and where institutional practices become habitual, and so unseen, (Ahmed, 2012). Automatic ways of working can submerge differences and compound discriminatory practices. Ahmed (2012, p. 27) puts it succinctly: "While habits save trouble, diversity work creates trouble"; the trouble is the need to re-think practices, in this case, in light of changes to the student demographic, and to re-align the 'standard story' which becomes "so self-evident that its claim to validity outweighs the need for justification or proof"(Abma, 1999, p. 171). Echoes of the social constructivism of Bruner (1986) can be heard within these words, where, he would argue, the 'canonical images' and stories within the culture – here pertaining to the university - need to change.

And so to the conclusion of this prologue, which has sought to foreshadow the troubling of the FGS 'standard story' as uncovered within the storied lived experiences of narrators within this research study. It is fitting perhaps to return to the work of Bruner (1990) to set the scene for what is to follow and to lay down the gauntlet of challenge; the challenge of identifying what 'parts' can be played by the actors within this study:

When we enter human life, it is as if we walk on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress – a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and towards what denouements we may be heading. Others on stage already have a sense of what the play is about, enough of a sense to make negotiation with a newcomer possible.  
(Bruner, 1990, p. 34)

The stage is set within this study for the actors – the narrators – to take their places and have their voices heard. Even the term 'take their places' may be a loaded term; non-traditional students may be required to 'know their place' and certainly they may be made to feel unwelcome in what is still a largely elitist (Thompson, 2012) and unfamiliar territory within university. Bruner's (1990) stage is the HE environment within this study and I focus on the parts that are being played by FGS as they walk into this 'somewhat open plot', where Widening Participation has changed the student demographic and where tuition fees have engendered the consumer mind-set. I argue that Bruner's (1990) 'somewhat open plot' may be more 'open' for negotiation by the non-traditional student than might be supposed by a literature that frames them negatively.

## Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

Narrative inquiry values the insight drawn from within individual stories rather than the search for shared themes across stories (Riessman, 2008). In recognition of this, each narrator's stories have been individually 'unpacked' to demonstrate how metaphors of belonging have been refracted through the prism of individual lifeworlds, or ecologies. I wish to consider the conceptual understandings of belonging that may be suggested by the metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) and to move towards a nuanced understanding of the construct. Building on the diversity of metaphors offered, I wish to maintain an ecological approach whereby the interconnections between ideas are valued and not suppressed, and where diversity represents strength (Braungart and McDonough, 2009) as a way to afford greater scope for understanding of the concept.

Within this chapter, each narrator is introduced and their narratives and metaphor of belonging provided. For ease of reference, where the metaphor of belonging is discussed, the metaphor is italicised. As outlined in the methodology chapter, I have chosen to present some of my narrators' stories within prosodic dialogue, inclusive of my utterances, as researcher (Mishler, 1999), in order to offer an authentic rendering of the conversation. The metaphors are presented in poetic format, using stanzas and parsing of the words according to the work of Gee (1985); this is offered as a way of bringing the voices of my narrators to the reader. I have also employed poetic format to other aspects of my gathered data as a way to bring form and content together (Mishler, 1999) to offer another layer

of interpretation; that is, as a way to show what it may feel like, and what it may mean (Bochner, 2002). Within the excerpts offered in these pages, my narrators are referred to by the names attributed to them for this study (see FIG 2), and I refer to myself as 'L', researcher. Where my utterances are largely part of the affirming but non-directing aspect of the conversation, they are provided within parentheses, in order to privilege the voice of my narrator. Since I conducted three conversations (C) with each narrator, I allude to these, where elements of temporality appear relevant, by means of C1, C2 and C3.

Four of my narrators are introduced initially and I offer both findings and discussion as I move through this chapter, as a way to story my research. Then, I have chosen to pause, and to take the time to reflect on what is being told within the narratives and metaphors of belonging. I take the opportunity to include my own thoughts and feelings, as a necessary actor within this unfolding story. The three remaining narrators are then introduced and researcher reflexivity is similarly applied to the findings as a whole. The final section of this chapter is devoted to the metaphorical conceptual understandings that might be taken from this work, as entailments (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), in order to reveal the richness of meanings of the construct of belonging, as articulated by these narrators. To begin, however, this chapter now moves to introduce the range of metaphors that have been articulated by my narrators.



## Narrators' metaphors of belonging

While this narrative inquiry study has made available a large body of storied lived experiences, it is to the evocation of metaphors of belonging that I principally draw attention within this section. Based on the affordances of their individual ecologies, narrators articulate their sense of belonging using metaphorical language and visual imagery, elicited by means of the creative strategies (Kara, 2015) employed within this study. Belonging is often expressed here as a deep-rooted and personal construct, influenced by the unique experiences of these narrators, upon which they draw as they navigate the HE landscape. Belonging is metaphorically described in many ways within this study: an *embrace*, a *life boat*, a *support system*, the *cracking of the shell*, a *bubble*, the *sea and the play of the light*, and *making memories*. I explore the tensions between such metaphorical understandings in order to develop a view of belonging, drawn from narrators' storying of experience that will shed light on the concept. I have already alluded to the slippery nature of belonging; its temporal dimension affords it the chance to disguise itself in many forms. The interplay between context and individual creates a unique experience, caught momentarily in time, and illuminated by the metaphors and narratives within this study. One seemingly everyday site of belonging is identified as the 'sofa' with its accompanying metaphor of the '*embrace*'.

### *The Embrace*

The sofa is a recurrent image within the conversations of Tessa who, living away from her familial home in a student house off campus, is often to be found "just

being” on the sofa; Tessa is a young, white teacher trainee. Returning from time spent on campus, the sofa is where Tessa can find comfort and relaxation; importantly, she is not required to answer to anyone or to account for her daily happenings. The sofa is presented as a location where she can be herself and be accepted for being that person. She talks of the house residents as a “little family” and this has resonance with her familial surrounds, where the sofa also predominates as a place of belonging; even the dog has her place on the sofa. Exclusion from the sofa, however, can symbolise loss of belonging:

Tessa: Yeah she [the dog] does what she wants.  
When I used to go home like,  
It's a two seater sofa so  
Um I'd sit on one  
And my sister would sit on the other

And [name of the dog] would just come and jump  
And my mum would just be like  
'That's [the dog's] seat,  
You can't sit there!'  
[Laughter]  
'That's where she sits!'

L: So you said, you just said a moment ago, 'When I got back, I was on my sofa and my other friend was on his sofa' so [Laughter] that seems to be a recurrent thing

Tessa: Yeah  
We have all got our spaces.

A space on the sofa invites belonging but the remonstrations of “you can't sit there!” has deeper significance within the ecology of this narrator. There is an unresolved rift between Tessa and her mother, which is revealed later in our final conversation during the photo-elicitation process. As a way of providing an image of belonging, however, it is her mother's embrace that Tessa shows me; she and her mother are both sat on the family sofa, about seven years previously when

Tessa was around 13 years of age. When I ask her if this is what belonging might feel like, her affirmative response is unequivocal and without hesitation.

Transformed into a poetic structure, Tessa's words offer an intimately personalised sense of belonging. Her inability to establish the authenticity of the embrace preoccupies her thinking and her repeated mention of it makes visible the anxiety she feels; she is unsure of her mother's intentions. But the '*embrace*' is offered as representative of what belonging might feel like:

L: Yeah. So do you want to talk me through this one? Only because.... because we are looking at belonging and here I see your mother with her arms around you.

Tessa: Yeah, I don't know.  
That's what I thought was interesting  
Um that's why I took the picture [from my grandma's]  
Unless it was just for the picture being taken

I don't know but um yeah.  
I don't know,  
I don't remember ever being close to my mum.  
So that's just,  
It was weird to see.

I don't hug my mum  
Except for when I'm leaving to come back to here.  
Um I don't know

It's just [Short pause] we never,  
I don't remember being close to her or anything  
So [Short pause] Yeah I don't have memories of it

So seeing that, I like  
'Did it happen?'  
'Do I just not remember?' or  
Um but I don't know.

Unless it was a different,  
I don't know if it could just be  
For the picture that she was doing that  
Or um whether it was actually like that,  
I don't know

L: And is that what belonging could feel like?

Tessa: Yeah

L: This? [Indicating photo with mum giving Tessa a full embrace]

Tessa: Yeah that's what I thought

Yeah this embrace

Like we don't do that anymore

The choice of this image to articulate a sense of belonging is one of 'being held' (Josselson, 1996). While the physicality of such an image is evident, it also encompasses an affective dimension; that of 'being held' emotionally. Josselson (1996, pp. 54-55) declares: "Many adults speak of their need to 'belong' to someone, which seems to be an adult expression of attachment..... One of the great difficulties in studying attachment, then, is the fact that it is a faint penumbra when smoothly functioning; it glows brightly only when disrupted". For Tessa, there has been a disjuncture in her life which remains currently unresolved with her mother so that feelings of acceptance, valuing, and feeling wanted are what Tessa seeks within her lifeworld as student. My own experiences with my family resonate strongly with this participant's story and I was mindful of not wishing her to leave this final conversation having offered personal information just as the session was about to close. For me, it calls to mind my years in the youth service when young people would confide in me just as they were leaving the setting; if I chose not to engage with the confidence, or chose to disapprove, then the young person was safe in the knowledge that they were leaving anyway. Tessa's decision to confide personal information at such a late stage is reflective perhaps of such a strategy. Her agreement to stay a little longer enabled me to work respectfully and ethically with this participant, acknowledging what she had

said (Paget, 1983) and demonstrating a relationship of trust wherein the researcher does not back away when content becomes uncomfortable, or 'unspeakable' (Riessman, 1990). The lexis of "just being" takes on a new significance in light of this confidence since it is, for Tessa, not having to justify herself or explain herself. The metaphorical '*embrace*' is found within the comfort of the sofa, replicated in the student house where "just being" is played out in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance, and where memories of spending time with the dog, as non-judgemental companion, reinforce feelings of belonging experienced over time:

Oh that's my dog  
I spend most of my time with her

I got home and I was home alone  
Because my family had already gone  
And I just held her  
She was really happy to see me  
And we just kind of chilled on the sofa

I like  
I love going home to see her  
I don't think she gets enough attention when I'm not there  
So when I go home  
I just give her all the attention she wants

She doesn't like understand  
But I was saying to her  
"Hug me, you are not going to see me for ages"  
But I was trying to cuddle her  
And she just didn't want any of it.

When I lived at home  
When I was younger  
If I was ever upset  
She would just come and sit on my lap  
And just cuddle me.

The '*embrace*' as a metaphor for belonging, which is offered after this dialogue, is foreshadowed within this excerpt, with the dog providing both nurturance and affection as well as resisting the physical 'cuddle' of the narrator. It is the mother's 'embrace' that is later offered as a representation of belonging, reflecting a parallel storyline of giving, and then taking away. The aspect of attention-seeking and attention-giving can also be found in this excerpt and I wonder to what extent it is Tessa who searches for such recognition within the familial surrounds. The family rift has seen Tessa "move away" (C2) and yet the evocation of feelings, borne of experience over time, retains the sofa as the site of belonging wherein memories of 'being held' in terms of valuing and feeling wanted are closely guarded. Working within a person-centred way with our students can foreground such prizing, or unconditional positive regard (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994), so that intellect can be nurtured by an affective 'climate' in the classroom, contributing to both cognitive and emotional aspects of 'being held'. For Tessa, the aspects of feeling wanted and valued are key to her well-being and are to be found in classroom practices which actively seek to include everyone. In the following poetic reconstruction, locating herself as both undergraduate student and early years' teacher trainee, Tessa highlights the need for teaching staff to reach out to learners:

I don't let people know when I'm struggling  
So I just get on with it  
I just keep myself to myself

Some placements will just refer to you as the student  
And not give you an actual name  
And it's kind of annoying  
What can you do?

If you see a particular shy kid

Make sure you engage with them  
Because they are not going to engage with you  
So you need to make that effort to talk to them

Because I was the shy one in school  
I just kind of kept myself to myself  
I just keep myself to myself  
And just get on with everything

I'm quite shy and quiet  
People can think I'm rude  
But I'm just quiet

Like if you see a shy child  
Just like engage with them  
Because they will feel more secure and wanted and valued

So yeah  
Just notice everyone  
Because you will always have the shy kids at the back  
That's who you need to engage with

### *The Life Boat*

The concept of belonging as 'being held' has more sinister overtones in the conversations of Becky where 'being held' too tightly can inhibit freedom and independence; belonging as possession provides an opposing perspective to the concept. Becky is a white, 'mature' teacher trainee living in her own home with partner and two young children and has always wanted to teach but never expected to be able to attend university and work towards this desired goal. Having sought out and achieved an Access course, and having waited until both children were in school, Becky is now caught in the continual 'balancing act' of juggling the demands of the course with her myriad domestic duties as mother and home-maker; "my children are. . . they are my priority" (C1). Acceptance of such a priority is perhaps lacking within the overall understanding of the HE

institution where the image of the 'ideal' student (Burke, 2012) retains its youthfulness and availability of time to focus entirely on the 'university project'; interestingly this is in spite of an academic workforce that will of necessity be grappling with similar competing demands of childcare and professional commitments. For Becky, the friends that she makes at university offer her the support that she lacks at home from a partner – referred to as 'he' within her talk - who disputes her claim to a university education. Working within the framework of metaphor elicitation, the following poetic stanza format is offered to represent Becky's 'sense of belonging':

I think we're in a rowing boat  
So, it's really hard work  
And I'm not saying it's not hard work  
They're (the younger teacher trainees) on a pleasure cruiser  
Yeah

Whole cruise ship with the  
Yeah and you know  
They've got the bar  
And they've got the cinema  
And the fun things

And we're in a rowing boat and [laughing]  
And yeah  
Paddling and  
Yeah

And we get there eventually  
But it's  
It's hard work [laughs]

I'm just imagining this little wooden boat  
And all of us sat in this [laughing]  
In this boat  
With an oar [laughs]  
Yeah  
Or a life boat

Yeah  
Yeah ooh yeah



Could look at it that way  
Last ditch attempt to change our lives  
Yeah  
Different career path

Erm [laughing] p. . .pulling an oar  
[Laughing] no it's quite, it's quite calm  
And we're all doing it together  
There's nobody sat at the top  
Shouting orders as such  
Yeah

We're all paddling together  
Keeping the boat afloat you might say  
Yeah

Helping each other to keep afloat  
That's a good one  
I like that  
Yeah

Cos it would have been so much harder I think  
If. . .if you know  
If we didn't have that understanding of each other  
And how hard it actually is

You sort of pull out the stops to help each other  
Don't you?  
Yeah  
You can

The collegiality of the friendship group becomes the overall survival strategy as Becky's life boat is realised, moving towards a new life where each can feel supported to achieve success and independence. The sense of belonging is to each other, as companions on a "last ditch attempt", almost conspiratorial in their perceived marginalised positioning, as 'mothers' and 'mature' students, alongside the "pleasure cruiser". This life-saving journey, constituted by hard work, and kept afloat by mutual understanding of each other, becomes the life-giving source they have struggled to achieve. Recognition of the need to 'break free' from her

oppressive belonging to a domestic role borne of tradition, Becky moves towards a life that she can enjoy, one that reflects the egalitarian and supportive nature of belonging experienced within the "boat", where no-one "is shouting orders as such". The concept of belonging as "moving forward" (Quinn, 2010, p.31) is reflected within this metaphorical image; a proactive moving away from "being stuck there in that little life which I don't really want" (C2) that she depicts so vividly in an earlier conversation. It is the "escape route" (C2) from such a controlled home environment that is offered by the route into university, from which future economic independence can provide security from the vicissitudes of life for her, and her children; a chance to change the storyline from the prospect of "... he [the partner] did actually say the one day 'a little part time job down the Co-op'" to fulfilling her dream of becoming a teacher. The struggles of gender role stereotyping play themselves out within this participant's ecology drawing on wider traditional socio-cultural contexts wherein the woman is expected to stay at home and look after the children and the man, while the latter remains the breadwinner, providing him with control of the household, and all those living within it.

The lack of gender equality within the traditional Western family (Giddens, 2002) is reflected within Becky's lifeworld in the home environment and yet she tells me it is her own father who raised her, and her siblings, from a young age owing to marital breakdown. As if an echo of the gender stereotyping, Becky's father had "never even made a cup of tea before in his life," (C2) and this upbringing may be an influencing factor in Becky's views on traditional gender roles. I learn that this

storyline is her driver to success; Becky's level of engagement in the university process is total since to quit or to fail is not an option. I am humbled by this participant's story of her "last ditch attempt to do this" and the level of sacrifice which she must necessarily have experienced up to this point. I am left wondering about the connections I have with this participant, much as Paget (1983) did in her study, in relation to the clear gender divisions within my own familial background over four decades previously which could so easily have obstructed my route to university. I do not recall such a sacrifice although I now wonder to what extent my own mother may have borne the brunt of my choice; one woman paying the price for another (Giddens, 2002). Wider socio-cultural forces can exacerbate the barriers to be overcome for our students and while institutional focus may be oriented towards additional classes or increased opening hours, it is the invisible and insidious effects of stereotyped attitudes that may go unnoticed, and unrecognised, within contemporary efforts to enhance the university student experience. Case's (2007) model is instructive since it highlights the areas of 'home' and 'one's studies' as sites where engagement can be forged and, in light of gender relations, such sites are worthy of further examination; initially for Becky these two sites are seemingly irreconcilable.

The separation between Primary Education students and Early Primary Education students is identified within this research study as an aspect which detracts from a sense of 'belonging' within the teacher training course. Additionally, the separation between home and course is a stark reality for Becky as she tells me in our first conversation: "at the moment my life is sort of home and uni, completely

separate" (C1), so highlighting the disconnect she experiences at this time.

However, within the second conversation I pose a question that is influenced by Anita Mishler's work (1978-1980, in Mishler, 1986, p.129) who seeks to find connections between students' course content and their lives outside of the academic world. This excerpt follows on from a discussion about the narrator doing her 'homework' alongside her daughters doing their school homework:

L: ... do you find connections...or what are the sorts of connections do you find with what you're learning here? Taking that outside to your other...your other life as it were outside.

Becky: Erm, it's... I love, I love it because, because I'm just go...I mean obviously I'm early primary so I'm sort of up to, erm, to really, end of key stage one but we have to look at key stage two as well. I've just gone through all this...

(L: Yes)

Becky:...And I've just done this all with my daughters.

L: Yes, yes of course

Becky: And so I sort of know, see what they're doing and I... I do find that I'm... I've started doing it already, and I haven't even qualified *[laughs]* really is that the best way they... do this? Or should they be doing it that way? Or "How do you find this? Do you find this interesting?" "No I find it boring mommy" Well that's exactly. That's exactly what I was going to say. Worksheets, so, erm, no, I'm...I'm thi... finding connections all the time...

(L: Okay)

Becky:...In what they're doing in what they're learning and how they're learning it. And what they enjoy and what they don't...

(L: Mmm)

Becky:...Making a mental note of these things. I mean, obviously all children are different but nobody likes worksheets. Do they?

L: But making those connections or taking what you're learning here or... because otherwise it...it there's a life at home and a life here but actually the connections in regard to what you're taking from your course 'cause it's very pertinent to your

two girls and the ages that they're at...

Becky: Yep.

L: As you say...

Becky: Yeah, I think

L: ... Must be something, does that help to...

Becky: I think it does, yeah, because it's relevant... it's relevant, yeah, I can... and I think even *he* sort of, thought oh yeah, yeah, well you wouldn't know that if you weren't on this course. So maybe you are doing some good, sort of thing when I can help them with their homework and the certain things that they don't quite get. I can help them out and...

(L: Mmm)

Becky: ...yeah I think he's...he sees that bit of it as quite useful. But yeah, I...I hadn't realised actually how much I do actually...

L: 'Cause your face lit up when you started to...

Becky: Yeah I do!

L: ...talking about...you sat up straight and your eyes lit up and actually I'm doing...

Becky: Yeah, I didn't realise how much I actually sort of do think about what I've learnt when I'm with them and when we're doing things, and why they do things, why would you do... ah! I know why you're doing that.

(L: Mmm)

Becky: Mmm, fascinating. Never thought about that really. (C2)

This excerpt is an example of a co-constructed dialogue which realises the participant's connections between her university studies and her home life. The immediate response is significant in that it lends support for her decision to undertake the course: "I think even *he* sort of thought oh yeah," and affirms her value to her daughters despite the guilt she bears in regard to not bringing in an income at this time. Previously (C1), this participant has hoped that she and her

university friends might meet up in the holidays so that greater links could be forged between the two lifeworlds; constraints of time have so far precluded such a meeting. The realisation, however, that she, as the teacher trainee, can be that link between home and university presents itself as a novel concept: “fascinating. Never thought about that really.”

This embodiment of the connection has the potential to build confidence in Becky’s abilities to be that future teacher – “I’ve started doing it already, and I haven’t even qualified *[laughs]*” – and to offer a more cohesive ‘feel’ to her lived experience. For Case (2007), the connections between one’s studies, one’s home, and one’s career constitute a contextual relationship that is actively sought by students; this narrator has already spoken of future benefits to her daughters but an existential link becomes evident here, highlighting more than the material benefit of a teacher’s income but the support and nurturance of a loving mother. From an ecological systems theory perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the workings of the ‘mesosystem’ – those interconnections between all aspects of the microsystem – are an important element in the well-being of the individual, in this case, the narrator.

The work of Stroh (2015) further advocates that: “one of the premises of systems thinking . . . is that the best way to optimize the system is to improve the relationships among its parts, not to optimize each part separately” (p.35). The co-construction of this narrative has served to make visible the relationships between those elements, or those “parts”, identified by Case (2007). As a result,

the system, here represented by the ecology of the narrator, has the potential to become more nurturing and sustaining in regard to the desired goal of doing well as a student since the narrator has been able to understand the interconnections between the parts (Stroh, 2015, p.16). In order for Becky to develop and progress to her optimum level, aspects within her ecology need to work positively together, to demonstrate healthy connections. The extent to which students' ecologies may offer affordances conducive to university study is an underpinning topic of my research study, together with the reciprocal task of how affordances might be recognised by the university as a means for such connections to be made. Lifeworlds, however, can be busy places and affordances may need to be creatively used in order to build on the strengths offered by the student (Kinney, 2015).

### *The Support System*

In her metaphorical journeying by *life boat*, Becky emphasises the connections she has with other 'mature' students on the course who are also mothers: "If we didn't have that understanding of each other...." Such recognition of a deep-felt connection with others is an important source of strength, and belonging, and is evidenced also within the storying of Terri as she progresses through her teacher training course. While she values the close friendship of two or three students, it is her own family, in contrast to that of Becky, which offers support and sustenance as she journeys along an unfamiliar life route. Although Becky's "pleasure cruiser" offers an image of hedonistic life as a young student, Terri, a young, white teacher trainee living within the familial home belies such a stereotype; the

populist assumption, based on her age and living arrangements, that she has plenty of time is one that is ill-founded. Her responsibilities of “watching” her younger siblings, helping out with the household chores, and contributing ‘rent’ to the family coffers via her Saturday job, “because it’s what’s expected” (C2), impact heavily upon the time available for full time study. Terri however is resourceful and positive; she tells her friends: “it’s just managing your time better” (C2). Wishing to become a teacher has guided Terri towards her undergraduate pathway and although her parents do not understand this aspect of her life, they provide the emotional and physical sustenance that is openly acknowledged and valued by her. As a way of foreshadowing the later metaphor of belonging as a ‘*support system*’, the following passage begins at the point where Terri has been talking about the support of her family and “all you need is that little bit of reassurance and then you can carry on again”:

Terri: And, they’ve always been firm believers of setting my goals very high, so they taught me from a very early age to think very high of myself and to expect a lot from myself, and to always aim for the best grades. So, they automatically can tell if something’s wrong, and they’ll just sit down [*laughs*]...

L: Sorry, I’m feeling really emotional, that sounds great! [*Laughs*] A lot of the literature says, some of the research can really affect the researcher, and it has [*laughs*]...

(Terri: It has [*laughs*])

L: ... oh dear! [*Sniffs*] Okay, so again, the idea of them not knowing about academia...

(Terri: Mmm)

L: ... but they know an awful lot about emotional support...

(Terri: Yeah)

L: ... and they understand stress.



Terri: Yeah. And I think that's, you mentioned belonging and I think that's the bit for belonging. And knowing that my family are there, regardless of anything else, I don't, I don't really need to sit and think "Do I belong to a uni?" It's nice knowing that I belong in a friendship group...

(L: Mmm hmm)

... that, that was key for me, but knowing that my parents were supportive of what I wanted to do, it might not have been what they wanted me to choose but they were very supportive of...

(L: Mmm)

... what I wanted to go into and how I'd get there. And I think that was my sense of belonging, is just knowing that I have people who, not necessarily understand what I'm doing, but, understand *me*...

(L: Yes)

... and understand how far I can push myself...

(L: Mmm)

... without making myself ill, or without overworking myself or anything. So that was the crucial bit for coming to uni and just working through "Oh, can I do this? Can I do that?" So I think sometimes it's not so much what I tell them, but more, they can notice, so if they can see that I'm really stressed they'll be like "What's going on?"

This narrative provides a strong counter-narrative to an earlier expression of concern to me, by Terri, that her parents do not understand her university studies. Here though, emphasis upon difficulties of understanding the academic life is replaced by the ability to 'sit and talk' with parents who do "not necessarily understand what I'm doing, but, understand *me*..." The passage begins with a clear declaration of Terri's positive upbringing and her basis for future achievement; what she has achieved before and what she can continue to achieve. For me, this has resonance with the asset-based approach, discussed within the review of literature, where strengths of students (Kinney, 2015) need to

be acknowledged and utilised, rather than compared to and measured against some 'ideal' (Burke, 2012), and found to be lacking. Terri demonstrates the value of such parental talk and frames it repeatedly as "very supportive", moving to accentuate the importance of the family with whom, in choosing the researched University, she has chosen to "stay close" (C1). The focus is on Terri's having been brought up to think highly of herself and to expect to do well. It is at this point that I, as researcher, become emotional; it is as if my own familial memories come crashing into the conversation to be compared to, and measured against, such an 'ideal' upbringing, and it is I who am found wanting. The roles within the conversation become reversed at this point. It is now Terri who is offering gentle affirmations while I am the one offering direction to the conversation.

Just as Terri is reassured by her parents, now it is I who am being reassured by Terri. She is listening, waiting for me to recover my composure, but without intervening or seeking to move away from the moment. Riessman (1990) discusses the way in which research can affect the researcher and this episode is an acknowledgement, and stark reminder, of my own awareness of my background as a way of offering greater transparency within the research study as a whole; choice of topic, design, methodology and interpretation are all keenly influenced by my positioning.

I am reminded once more of the work of Paget (1983) who wonders about the participant she is listening to and how recognition of the participant's story, in the moment, is acknowledged by them both; where communication is more than

hearing the words but about recognition of what is being said. In the moment, I have recognised the poignancy of Terri's words and the import they have for me. Terri too has noticed. The conversation falters for a short while, supported now by the narrator; my trust in the narrator is demonstrated just as she has already entrusted me with her stories. It is noteworthy that following this emotional moment, Terri introduces the concept of belonging: "you mentioned belonging". In fact, the word 'belonging' has not been used at all within this conversation (C2) until this point. I hazard that Terri is seeking to get me back on track, to move forward from my upset, and to work with the concept that she understands to be my research focus. In support of presenting such detailed records, it is Mishler (1999) who argues the importance of including researcher contributions within the transcript in order to show how the conversation, as product, has been actively co-constructed within the context of the research study. The injection, by Terri, of the concept of belonging effects a 'shift' within this conversation to offer a valuable insight into an appreciation of how understanding is a part of what belonging is for her; recognition of such understanding - "understand *me*"- is a key value for this participant .

Trust and recognition are powerful drivers of well-being. Treacher's (2006) work on the politics of recognition is discussed in the literature review and here Terri would seem to embody their value. She is understood by her parents; they notice when all is not well, just as Tessa has earlier emphasised the need for teaching staff to "just notice everyone". For Terri, it is not incumbent on her to approach her parents as they will recognise her stress or discomfort and offer support; this

level of understanding constitutes 'belonging' and she acknowledges also that she finds it within her friendship group. The following poetic reconstruction continues to privilege the lexis of 'support', which for Terri, is an important factor for her well-being:

Yeah, it was really, really significant for me  
To have, erm, quite a close bond with my friends  
Like, even through the summer we still talk  
And we give each other little nudges  
Like "Check your grades",  
"Check that they've come through"

Because then you're there for them as a support system  
If they haven't come back as the grade that they wanted  
And you can prepare 'em on what's gonna happen next.  
Erm, but having three or four of us that are quite close,  
It works out really nice  
Because we give each other the little nudges

When you've got quite a stressful time  
It gets a bit heated  
And they're the people that take a step back and say  
"You're frustrated."  
It's okay because we know what you're going through"

And they don't judge you on that,  
They sit back and go  
"It's okay, to say what you need to say,  
And then we can work through it".

So they let you have the rant and you have your rant,  
And you have that sense of belonging then,  
You sit and think "I can do this,  
Because I've got the support system around me that I needed to"

And it makes you feel a bit more comfortable really  
That your own worries are what someone else is thinking  
And it sort of breaks down the barrier then  
That you're not doing everything by yourself

The need for Terri to journey with support is evident from her conversations but the reciprocity of support is deeply embedded within her construct. With her

friends, the “nudges” work to remind her of aspects she may miss owing to her busy home life, but they are offered above as a way to support others, much as Becky has earlier delighted in her own turn of metaphorical phrase: “Helping each other to keep afloat”. In terms of her familial responsibilities, Terri acknowledges such reciprocal benefits; while she notes that she would not have wished to move away to study and lose the support of her family, she is equally mindful of the benefits that her family secure from her being at home to support siblings and household duties. The tacit understanding of a close parental bond, however, can be invaluable in providing emotional and physical support even in the absence of specific academic understanding, as the following short excerpt shows:

Terri: ... Erm, my Mom’s very good,  
She’ll just come in and she’ll say  
“I’ve bought you a bag of chocolates  
To get through your work tonight”...  
(L: [*Laughs*])  
And it’s like  
“D’you know what Mom?  
That’s just what I needed!”  
(L: [*Laughs*])

### *Cracking the shell*

The physical and emotional sense of ‘being held’ within the concept of belonging is explored further by my conversations with Nadia. Here, the dialectical interplay between ‘being held’ and ‘breaking free’ is raised to a level whereby the participant would appear to ‘see’ the tensions within the concept of belonging, as they relate to her own ecology; my follow-up conversation with her, to which I allude later, would appear to confirm such an observation. As a metaphorical representation of belonging, I choose the words of Nadia in our first conversation where she is talking of ‘*cracking the shell*’:

Nadia: Yeah I feel like I've cracked the shell at work  
(L: yes)  
Now I wanna crack it here (laughs) you know  
(L: Yeah, yes)  
So I think it's about time, work and erm studying...  
(L:Mmm)  
...I wanna deal with them, I wanna open up to them

The shell, as a metaphor, for her lived experience of belonging is an insightful one. While it serves to 'contain' and inhibit her within the HE environment, it is "cracked" within her place of work, so allowing for further growth and development, where she is enabled to live out her professional role. Nadia is a young Muslim student, of Pakistani origin, on an education degree pathway focusing on early childhood. Her desire to "keep on the right track" is keenly bound up with her religious and cultural background wherein guidance from the Quran helps her to understand what is expected (C3). Nadia is highly motivated to succeed; motivation becomes apparent as a key driver for this participant. The family circumstances reveal a rift with some extended family members so that proving that she, as part of her small familial unit, can do well is important to her. Her background appears to offer both a sense of strength and stability within her studies but also a source of difficulty in making friends:

Nadia: Erm, erm, but cos...cos like I don't go out much, and I feel like cos I'm like...I'm... just...you know how girls that dress up and they (*inaudible 36:15*) hair and everything like, but I'm the only one with a scarf, most of the friends that I've got are obviously English and you know it...it's kind of hard.

I think that [*sound of participant tapping on table*] puts me off to having a erm, frie...developing friendships part, I think this is erm, when this is a part of me and might be a part of like me and lacking that...er, that...that...that thing of...of developing friendship...of being confident and talking to others [*sound of participant tapping on table*].

I can't talk to erm, you know how some people just talk to boys and everything? I can't [*giggles*] ...I can't connect with like other people that I don't know, you

know (*inaudible 36:58*) but o...erm, s...saying that, at work, I...cos I'm the only one wearing a scarf again, but I'm okay at work, I talk to parents, erm, I'm okay talking to those but I can't talk to...I'm...I'm really...I'm not confident person talking to people in uni, like other people, like you know, like you know what I mean like?

I ca...I think wearing the scarf, basically, to the point, wearing the scarf and like, how I am already as I said I'm a little shy, wearing the scarf is another thing that puts a barrier to...to...developing confidence and developing friendship relationships. That's...that's what I think

This long narrative offers insights into Nadia's struggles with the practical means of making friends within her class cohort, where she is the only Asian student, and scarf-wearing student, in her class. Throughout the three research conversations, Nadia identifies that she would have expected to make more friends at University: " Erm, I think, you know, us making... connecting, with peers, erm with university students, I did expect to erm [*coughs*] make more friends, kind of thing, as you would expect. But, not really. I feel, people in university, is very difficult to make friends" (C1). The hesitancy of the long narrative above, with its numerous false starts, pauses, and tapping of the table, is perhaps testimony to the participant's having to work through her thoughts to respond to the topic of making friends; Riessman (1990) refers to this as the 'teller's problem', that is, the need for the narrator to construct an appropriate response for the researcher. The narrative is clearly a product of the context within which it is constructed (Mishler, 1999); in this case, the worlds of both narrator and researcher are very different.

As a white female European researcher, I am reminded of Riessman (2008), a white female American researcher, who recounts her study of working with Indian women around the topic of infertility. In her study, Riessman (2008) has to rely

upon the skills of a translator but is also deeply cognisant of the disparity between the cultural norms and values of herself and her research participant. So, too, I also am mindful that such hesitancy within my narrator may have been to do with the task of constructing a response which I, as researcher, am able to understand. It is perhaps significant that having struggled to find the words in the above narrative, she finally offers her thoughts in direct terms: "...basically, to the point... that's what I think". In our first conversation, I have already checked my understanding of the phrase: "apart from my brother will get married as well *[laughs]*" (C1), so that I appreciate the wife will come to live in Nadia's familial home. This continuing requirement to breach the cultural divide and to explain herself is later summed up when talking about working within her employed work as a teaching assistant in a private nursery setting: "But with that parent we know that, the Muslim parents, we have that connection of erm, not having to clarify ourselves?" (C3). Tacit recognition of others' values and knowledge base is a powerful connector and overcomes those "vexed spaces" (Treacher, 2006) that otherwise serve to put distance between us. When I ask, "do you experience those types of feelings here? When you don't have to clarify yourself?" the response is quickly made: "Not really, I don't think erm, I think erm... I think it's different, I think I do have to clarify myself here" (C3). The wider socio-cultural aspects of living as a Muslim within contemporary Britain can be seen within Nadia's narratives; at times she makes indirect mention of what I perceive to be Islamophobia: "with how the world is... how everything is going right now" (C2). For Nadia, the cultural norms of socialising within the family detract from her ability to make new non-Muslim friends, who are her peers at University, as she is



keen not to upset her family. From the perspective of the family, the safety aspects of Nadia remaining within her own cultural community may be their primary concern at this time, although within her workplace, Nadia is also the only Asian worker. The worlds of work and of the university, however, present themselves very differently for this participant.

The professionalism of the workplace is an important aspect for Nadia. For her, it signals her role based on her developing skills and knowledge; it places her in a similar position, she tells me, to the tutors at university in that she has responsibility over her young charges. The professional world enhances Nadia's student experience in that she is able to apply her growing knowledge to her working practice almost immediately and it is the goal of becoming a professional that is a prime focus for this narrator; all her academic endeavours are geared to a forward-looking outcome of being equipped to do well in a competitive employment market:

L: So how does that compare with how you might feel that you feel that you belong here? How does it compare?

Nadia: I feel that erm  
In terms of belonging  
I feel more belonged in work  
(L: Mmm)

Where er yeah  
Because I can obviously connect more  
Erm at work than at university

University's ok as well  
I'm able to connect but it's just in terms of the academic  
Academic like working  
To do my assignments

But in socially  
Belonging socially  
Is at work because  
I'm able to open myself like there (L: yeah) with children

Obviously  
Cos that's my job role  
(L: yes)  
As well as what I want to do  
(L: yes)  
So it's there I feel more belonged  
Because that's what I want to do

University for me is erm  
Take as much opportunity as I can  
But obviously that's restricting cos of work yeah that's  
University is important but I see it as getting  
(whispers) my assignments done

C1

The particular wording "I feel more belonged" both in stanzas 1 and 5 is interesting in itself in that it deviates from the more usual lexicon of "belonging (socially)", used in stanza 3. Although this participant is fluent in English, her understanding of the term may offer a particular emphasis on the 'feeling state' offered within the concept; in the final conversation she notes in relation to the Quran: " 'Cause that obviously gives me the belonging er of my culture, it helps me to feel belonged, to why I'm following Islam" (C3). For Nadia, belonging is seen to be very much a "feeling"; when talking about being able to trust the one friend she has, she notes: "that's a big part in the feeling, in belonging" (C3). She later discusses the fact that not being able to share "your feelings" with university peers is a limiting factor in feeling a sense of belonging whereas, at work, she is able to "open herself" to the children, since that is part of her practitioner role.

Working within a role, as a professional, gives confidence to this participant in a way that being a student does not. It offers her responsibility and authority and also guidance in how to behave, which for this participant may be important in that, for her faith, she takes guidance from the Quran. The broad and vague role of student may not, in this case, be sufficient a guide for the expected behaviours and dispositions attached to the role. In the absence of being able to readily make friendships, Nadia is pragmatically taking “as much opportunity” as she can in order to succeed in her academic coursework, which, in turn, will equip her to progress within the professional field of childcare. The final line of the stanza is whispered as if to witness the reality that social connections to people are perhaps expected at university, but, in her present situation, it is the goal of assignment completion which is privileged. In contrast, the ability to “open herself” to the children within the workplace becomes the basis for her metaphor of belonging; that is, she wishes to “crack the shell” at university now that she has been able to accomplish this in her professional role.

Having talked at length about her strong sense of belonging to her faith and yet her perceived limitations of making friends owing to her dress code and the cultural norms of her family, Nadia’s lexicon of ‘crack’ and ‘open’ is insightful. It is perhaps a desire on her part to become more open to others; she notes elsewhere that she finds it hard to share her ideas, so that ‘open’ here may represent being less guarded around other people. In light of her concerns about being a Muslim in contemporary Britain, though, it is not unsurprising that guardedness may hold back the ability to ‘open herself’; the openness of others is a pre-requisite.

Working with children would offer a safer terrain for such openness as Nadia is working with very young children (2-3 year olds) who may not yet have been acculturated into the insidious effects of prejudice and discrimination. The notion of *cracking the shell* is offered here as something that has been achieved by Nadia at work, assisted by the daily familiarity of professional working in contrast to the less frequent academic class sessions: "But with work it's just those same people, you know 'em, you get to know them and everything, you break out of that shell, like..." (C2).

It is noteworthy that Nadia has been part of a fixed class cohort for the most part of her undergraduate studies so that it is the ability to get to know those around her that is the issue here rather than the absence of "those same people" at university. In my follow-up conversation with Nadia, I learned that since my third conversation with her, she had in fact asked to move from one class cohort to the other, accompanied by her one friend. Her request was approved and she now has female Muslim peers in the class. She 'feels' more settled and I am reminded of the work of Mishler (1986, p.135) who notes: "I have been emphasizing respondents' problems, that is, their efforts to develop adequate and coherent understandings of their experiences so that they may act more effectively for their own ends". While Nadia did not attribute her new positioning within the student body to my research study with her, she has always mentioned at the end of each conversation about how much she has enjoyed 'sharing her thoughts': ". . . it was really [*coughs*] it was really great sharing and talking and it's kind of helped me as well . . . You know it's kind of helped me to reflect back on what's motivating right

now you know, I don't really get a time to think about it you know. So it's been really good. Thank you" (C3). The ability to take 'time out' to reflect is a significant one, I would argue, in the busy lifeworlds of our students. The therapeutic nature of talking within the research process is acknowledged (Elliott, 2005; Oakley, 1981; Riessman, 1990) in terms of its scope for participants to make meaning of their own experiences and the work of Mies (1983) locates such work within the wider socio-political context, where raised awareness can effect changes within the individual lifeworld. Nadia would seem to have effected this change to her circumstances in light of becoming aware of the limitations of the original class group. In contrast to embracing the lack of friends as an individual character flaw, she has moved away from this to acknowledge the possibilities of a broader sociological view wherein her positioning as a Muslim woman may impact her interactions with those around her.

"Time to think about it you know"

I wish to pause at this juncture, to take 'time out' to reflect along the way, and to begin to consider what is revealed so far and what meanings might be made from the storying at this point. The metaphorical journeying of these narrators through the HE landscape serves to make visible the notions of belonging that are experienced through the prism of unique lifeworlds. In terms of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the concept under investigation, in this case that of belonging, is unfolded to reveal the "narrative histories" (p. 31) that lay within it for each of the participants. The transient nature of the journey becomes apparent; for most, it is a purposeful and forward-facing one looking to reap the benefits that a university

education has to offer (Basit, 2012) in terms of both personal freedom and professional status. The temporal element is a significant one within narrative inquiry which emphasises the past, present, and future meanings attached to an experience. I wish to argue that the concept of student belonging is founded on past experiences of belonging within a range of contexts, and while I am not seeking to uncover a causal explanation (Paget, 1983) of the phenomenon itself, the influences and evocations of past lived experiences can help to illuminate the present (Gadamer, 1960; Rodman, 1992) and afford greater depth of understanding of the concept. I offer, then, an illumination of lived experience; that is knowledge derived from in-depth exchanges as a way to understand more fully (Paget, 1983). As such, the uncovering of ecologies of belonging as lived, in the here and now, seeks to add to the weight of research already conducted in the field, offering personalised, narrativised accounts of how belonging is articulated, and experienced, within this one small research study.

The metaphorical images that have been articulated so far - the *embrace*, the *life boat*, the *support system*, and the *cracking of the shell* – bear witness to the variety of articulations of belonging. Within these storied experiences, I find that belonging manifests itself along a continuum of 'being held' to 'breaking free'; two extremes of the same phenomenon. Conceptualising a nuanced understanding of belonging, then, may offer greater scope for understanding how it operates and how it is experienced; in turn, it may afford ways of provision within a systems theory approach to the complexities it entails. Belonging experienced as a supportive and nurturing, relational context is part of Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of

needs wherein successful provision, or creation, of such a state enables the individual to move on to self-esteem needs, and finally to self-actualisation; this latter pinnacle of achievement, though, is seen to be fleeting and transitory. The Rogerian core principles of person-centred working are founded upon such motivational bases, wherein it is argued that unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy constitute the elements needed for respectful working with others. The underlying premise is that such conditions need to be created in order for such working to be realised. Using ecologically-driven systems theory thinking, I argue that it is the 'niches' – those various zones of habitation and resource use within an ecosystem - that can provide the 'locations' for such conditions; the element of diversity of provision is paramount within this conceptual rendering of the topic.

As a conceptual framing of belonging, as storied so far within this study, the metaphors are instructive. Belonging as holding or nurturance is captured in the '*embrace*' and the '*support system*' wherein physical and emotional sustenance are imbued with feelings of being valued, secure, and noticed. I could be said to have offered such a conceptual 'climate' within the narrative inquiry methodology itself; that is, narrators were 'held' respectfully within the context of the research conversations, encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings while I was able to "poke gently at perplexities" (Paget, 1983, p.88), and affirmed in their articulation of ideas. Since my person-centred approach 'mirrors' such emphasis upon affiliative climate, it may be that narrators were able to 'feel' such holding within the research experience; I did not ask if this were the case but the candid nature

of many conversations may reflect such an atmosphere. I was often humbled by my narrators' stories within the conversations: the 'eleventh-hour' confidence of a rift with mum; the need to be noticed; the plan to escape an oppressive lifestyle; the simplicity of a gift of chocolates; and the inability to make friends. My own emotional holding by Terri mirrors the process of creating a climate conducive to such expressions of candour, and vulnerability; I offer it as an example of the diminishing of power relations which is a quality of feminist methodologies.

Similar candour is provided in the *life boat* metaphor. Belonging as possession is witnessed within the "escape route" scenario whereby the *life boat* offers a means to 'break free', a chance to survive, and a way to a better 'life'. The possessive aspects of the word 'belonging' are perhaps not without significance. Terri, within part of her conversation detailed above, asks the rhetorical question: "I don't really need to sit and think "Do I belong to a uni?" It's nice knowing that I belong in a friendship group". The use of the terminology 'belong to' and 'belong in' would seem of import here to differentiate perhaps between two opposing elements of belonging. Belonging 'to' can imply ownership, as one might own a commodity; the current marketization of HE in most parts of the UK may point to the commodification of the student body, so that total numbers of students in the institution are important referents for funding procedures, and institutional targets. Knowing then how many students belong to a university may have little to do with affective relationships which belonging 'in' would seem to evidence in regard to Terri's friendship group.



For Becky, who is last seen paddling in the *life boat*, it would appear that escape is from an ideological belonging to traditional gender relations, where belonging is oppressive, undemocratic, and often unseen. The inherent tensions within Becky's experience are played out in the research conversations and bear witness to the competing loyalties of being a 'good mother' and gaining professional status to provide for one's family in an age of growing equality for women (Giddens, 2002). Belonging as posited on the need to "move" (Quinn, 2010) is reflected within the person-centred philosophy whereby the individual is facilitated to move towards self-actualisation, within a safe environment (Rogers, 1990); the idea is taken from Maslow (1962). Since moving constitutes change, it presents pressures for those such as Becky who is being held within a firm grasp of strict gender roles where traditional responsibilities continue to hold sway. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that Becky's friendship group is composed of other 'mature' mothers who may have had to face similar challenges within their own ecologies. Mutual recognition of similar life experiences can help these students to coalesce around a new experience (Young, 1990) of being in HE, and to facilitate a "reciprocity between them, in the sense that each acknowledges and takes account of the other" (Young, 1997, p.343). Such reciprocity would seem to underpin the words of Becky in her *life boat*: "Cos it would have been so much harder I think . . . If we didn't have that understanding of each other."

The inability to understand those around her, and they her, is perhaps the underlying premise of Nadia's metaphorical imagery of *cracking the shell*. Protected within the security of her cultural norms and religious beliefs by a

seemingly fragile and yet durable 'shell', her desire to "open up" to others is not as unproblematic as it might seem. The "vexed spaces" (Treacher, 2006) lie in wait for those who would extend the hand of friendship, and Nadia's self-confessed lack of confidence in talking to those outside of her familial circle makes reciprocity of understanding an unlikely outcome. Held tightly within the 'shell' of cultural ideology and faith, and perhaps fixed within it by a society who sees only the headscarf, Nadia finds herself wishing to move towards a greater sense of belonging with those who inhabit her HE world. Just as eggs in the natural world usually depend on the hard work of the egg's inhabitant to find a way out, so too Nadia is resolved also to "get back on track"; her transfer to another cohort of students is testimony to her determination. For each of us, then, the need is to find our way, to navigate the HE system, and to find those 'niches' where we can find sustenance and support in a myriad of guises.

#### Moving on

Having explicated meanings from four of the narrators' stories within this study, privileging their voices to illuminate their lived experience of belonging, couched in the ecologies of their unique lifeworlds, the remaining three storied accounts await similar attention. Nadia's metaphor of *cracking the shell* identified the concept of being held, and kept safe until such time as the inhabitant is ready to 'break out' and engage in the wider environment. Similar ideas are to be found within the following storied accounts as well as temporal factors to do with the past, present, and implied future. I re-present here the metaphors of: a *bubble*, the *sea and play of the light*, and *making memories*.

### *A bubble*

For Chloe, a young, white, teacher trainee living on campus, distanced from the familial home, the issue of safety is an important factor in her narratives of belonging. She talks of being “bubble-wrapped”, as a student, in her first year of study, whereby the institutional systems were employed to initiate her gently into the daily practices of academic life and when asked about a metaphor around belonging she offers the following:

Like you know  
When you get wrapped up in a really nice duvet  
Like you're really relaxed  
And you're sat watching like your favourite film  
Or something like that

Like that kind of feeling there  
Like being so relaxed and chilled  
That you can just be you

The aspect of being closely wrapped, feeling safe, and relaxed is conducive to earlier discussion of ‘being held’ (Josselson, 1996), both physically and emotionally. The reference to being ‘bubble wrapped’ by the institution upon entry to HE is an interesting one, offering recognition of a protective HE duty of care to guard against unfamiliar ways of being, or reflecting this particular narrator’s need to feel protected. Building on this, when asked to consider student belonging, in particular, Chloe moves away from the security of the ‘duvet’ and adopts the metaphor of a *bubble*: “Like we have an Early Years bubble and like we are very comfortable in it”.

I don't know about that one really  
That one's not as like  
You're still chilled but not as chilled  
  
Like you belong but

You have always got that  
Like nagging stress behind you  
Constantly

Because we've always got like work to do  
Like we all share that same stress  
So like we have that same little bubble of stress

So it is like we are all in this little bubble  
And like we're all stressed about the same thing  
So we don't feel as stressed  
If that makes sense like

Because we are all panicking about the same things  
So you don't feel like  
'Oh my gosh I'm panicking about this  
This has to happen now'

Like you can kind of relax a bit  
Because other people are stressing with you  
Being in there together  
Like you're in the same situation

Like you're all stuck in there together  
Like stuck probably isn't the best word  
Because like you kind of chose to be here  
But like you've all got like the same issues going on

Like you've got your individual things outside of uni  
But like in uni  
We've all got the same things  
And we're all just like stuck together

The collegiality represented as "other people are stressing with you" is the overriding element of this metaphor, which brings comfort despite the ongoing tension of "that same stress." The ideas of Young (1990) wherein people come together, not to become like each other, but to coalesce around emerging interests, seem reflected within this metaphorical construct of Chloe's bubble. She is cognisant of "individual things outside of uni" which take their own precedence, within individual ecologies, and which operate alongside issues of being a student;

the complexity of lifeworlds is acknowledged and validated by this narrator, for whom living on campus might have assumed a more selective focus on the lifeworld of academic study. The commonality of the “same things” which make demands of all students offers the cohesive factor here, where safety and intimacy of the ‘duvet’ is replaced by the transparency of a *bubble*, a shared space of stress which provides the social cement – “stuck together” – to get through the demands of academic living; the lexicon of the word “constantly” acts to slow down the tempo as if to echo the weight of “nagging stress” which accompanies the students’ days. Interestingly, the metaphorical use of the word “stuck” is offered with two meanings; on the one hand designating being together in close proximity, and on the other, as being without options, or choice.

The ability of a *bubble* to float – reminiscent of Becky’s “keeping each other afloat” – may point to its manoeuvrability and survival mechanism aspects, while its fragility may suggest a rather tenuous, or transient, ‘holding’. The freedom to make choices is an important factor within belonging, for Chloe, and when talking about being part of a student group, she emphasises the choice to not be dependent on it but the choice to “break free from it” (C2). The fragility of a *bubble* may offer similar potentiality, much like Nadia’s *cracking of the shell*; containing and protective but a temporary measure to allow for freedom and growth.

The requirement to spend time in placement settings gives Chloe the chance to articulate how belonging is created in unfamiliar surrounds; she stories her

experiences in the placement setting where trust, responsibility, and respect are afforded her by the setting staff resulting in her ability to “settle in very, very quickly” (C2). In turn, this offers her the opportunity to feel sufficiently supported to make choices for herself; for Chloe, the ability to make choices about how she is teaching is reflective of, and a testimony to, her sense of belonging experienced within the placement setting. The following narrative excerpt is located in the setting where the placement teacher provides a nurturing environment for Chloe in her second year of study. Chloe and another teacher trainee negotiate to take all children from two ‘lowers’ (low-achiever groups) on a forest walk and despite the teacher’s reservations, Chloe tells me that the children “like, they aren’t animals. They can get on with things” (C2). Chloe continues:

Chloe: .... She [the class teacher] was like having a heart attack and as soon as we came back in she was like ‘How did it go?’ and we were like ‘Breathe. They are all back’ [laughs] ‘Nobody ran away’. It was such a good lesson though, just having that freedom like

(L: Yes)

Like we had to take it from her though because she wasn’t going to just do it

(L: Yes)

But after we did that she was like “it’s opened up my eyes now to see that they are more capable of things as long as I adapt my lessons to them and not them to my lessons”

(L: Yes)

And she was like ‘that helped me’ and I was like ‘Yes!’

For me, the mutuality of this narrative is evident; Chloe trusts and respects her young charges and the teacher trusts and respects the young trainees. The outcome is a session in which the ‘lowers’ are able to demonstrate their capacity

and the trainees are able to demonstrate their understanding of educational 'differentiation'. The teacher has the courage, and respect for her trainees, to openly acknowledge her own learning and Chloe's recognition of the teacher's recognition is plainly visible within the heartfelt 'Yes'. The participatory aspect of learning is evidenced here within Chloe's successful negotiation of provision so that the 'pedagogy of mutuality' (Bruner, 2006) is exercised in a way that engages the teacher trainees in the process of teaching-learning as equal partners; belonging here not does accommodate aspects of deficit. It is salient that Chloe considers the 'lowers' to be worthy of attention and innovative practices. She refutes the negative framing of the children, reminiscent of Kinney's (2015) asset-based approach, and is cognisant of having to 'take' the freedom from the teacher.

There is a parallel here, I find, with the negative framing to be found within the literature surrounding the non-traditional student, inclusive of FGS. Chloe demonstrates her understanding of the negative discourse surrounding these 'lowers' and appears to relate to the 'insider' feelings she may hold in regard to being similarly viewed. For instance, she tells me that in selecting to become a teacher, she has broken away from the family 'norms' of work destinations - factory or shop work - and her conversations are steeped in instances of showing the 'hard work' she undertakes to complete her 'B.Ed'. The necessity to 'take' the freedom is insightful. For Chloe, it is the chance to negotiate provision that is important to her as a means by which she is able to exercise choice. It is perhaps such an attitudinal disposition that will seek to re-imagine the HE landscape

(Quinn, 2010) as a way of locating students more positively within it. The interconnectedness of such influences is part of ecological systems thinking (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) whereby change in one part of the ecosystem has the potential to interact with other parts, so transforming them, and being transformed by them.

Being able to voice viewpoints, and negotiate terms, is seen as important for Chloe and is associated with a growing sense of belonging:

Chloe: Yeah like being able to have choices. Like once you feel settled and like belong somewhere like you're able to make those choices

(L: Yeah)

If you're like not settled somewhere, you're not able to like, you feel like you just have to do what everyone says. Whereas like this year like first year we were sat there in uni and like we'd have like tutors telling us to do something and we would just do it because we were like 'They've told us to do it and we have to do it' [Laughter]

And like this year we're just like 'I don't want to do that' and we're like 'That isn't going to help me'. Like we've done that with literacy this year, we've completely changed what we were supposed to be doing. Like our tutor had planned loads of things and we were like 'We don't need that. We've done plenty of phonics, we don't need it'. We were like 'get rid of it. Let's do something else. Do Key Stage one' and he was like 'Right okay you've just put me on the spot and completely like ruined my session' and he was like 'Thanks guys' [laughs] but we were like 'But we don't need it'. We were like 'You can waste two hours talking about it but none of us are going to be engaged because we don't care'.

The notion of feeling "settled" is aligned here with belonging. Having eased herself into the student cohort, she and her peers are confident to voice their views and to challenge the teaching-learning session. Belonging, then, can be seen as exemplifying a two-way exchange where familiarity and openness can be used as a basis for negotiation of provision. This may offer a challenge to traditional ways of working that is resisted by academic staff who are often obliged to plan ahead



before the students have even entered the classroom. While student questioning and critical thinking are attributes to be encouraged, it is perhaps interesting to speculate to what extent such attributes are valued within the pedagogical framework of HE. Sharing pedagogical practices with students (Clarke, 2015) has been recommended as a way to enhance effective teaching, and demystifying the HE process (Burke, 2012) a way to draw students into the often unfamiliar ways of working. In order to 'mirror' teaching-learning processes, in particular for teacher trainees, but pertinent for all students, it would seem appropriate, and indeed, desirable, that students are privy to the pedagogical workings of the programme. Such a perspective demonstrates, I would argue, a valuing of the student and offers a more professional aspect to the student role, something that Nadia, for instance, may appreciate.

### *The sea and play of the light*

Ellen is a white, 'mature', part-time student on a joint education degree programme. She attends during the evening when, she says, the feel of the university campus is quite different to that experienced during the daytime; small class groupings with students who are generally working during the day and whose aim is to "come in and get the work done, and almost go" (C1). During the photo elicitation session, Ellen brought in an artefact (FIG 5) as a way of talking about her sense of belonging; it was a piece of stained glass that reminded her of the sea and I include an image of it below.



FIG 5: Stained glass artefact

Ellen was intent on explaining how the play of the light through the glass brought it alive and I am aware that attending of an evening, as a part-time student, precludes the play of natural light for most of the academic year. The stained glass represents her love of the sea, with its sense of freedom, and the fond memory of place, where the light is altogether different, “a magical place” (C3):

I brought in a piece of stained glass  
That I made a little while ago  
On a course

I brought it because it reminds me of  
St Ives, St Ives,  
Which is where we go on holiday

So to me  
That’s my sense of belonging I suppose  
It is beautiful

It needs to be held up to the...  
To the real light  
It’s very pretty

I have it hanging in the conservatory, yeah  
Because it's light in there  
You need to have a light behind it so

I'm a big fan of stained glass  
I love stained glass  
I think it's the difference that light makes.

Like this looks quite...  
This looks quite uninteresting really doesn't it?  
It...sat there like that.

But when you put it up to the light it comes alive doesn't it?  
And... and I suppose I feel that,  
That sense of belonging and that...I don't know

I just feel so much better being there  
Somewhere light and bright and somewhere  
I feel like I belong I suppose.

I love the feeling of being in the sea  
It's such a lovely thing  
I think it's freedom

It feels like freedom I suppose  
I think that's part of it

And the kids have grown up with that feeling  
That belonging  
They love it there.

The evocation of place and memory is replete within this poetic representation of Ellen's words. The lexis of 'light' is repeatedly employed to reinforce the beauty of the artefact and I am struck by its contrast to what Ellen has told me of her upbringing; from a very young age she was raised within a "very, very strict, very, very rule based" (C2) church-going family, where questioning was not encouraged and obedience to parental control was absolute. For me, the stained glass held a resonance to her faith but upon discussing this, Ellen was quick to impress upon

me that she “wasn’t really brought up in a sort of stained glass sort of church sort of environment really” (C3). This is a stark example of a co-constructed meaning. Left to my interpretation alone, I would have leaned towards a religious connection, reflecting my own upbringing as a means to illuminate the life of another.

Recent self-initiated changes to her personal faith, over the past few years, are now accompanied by Ellen’s drive to learn ‘knowledge’ and it becomes apparent that this is a way of coming to terms with her own childhood upbringing; university content on child development and upbringing serve to shed ‘light’ on her own younger years and it is noteworthy, I would argue, that in metaphor elicitation around student belonging, Ellen describes it as “it’s made me almost feel young again. Because you come in as a student, especially because I teach, you’ve got a teacher hat on so you have to be mature don’t you? You have to be professional” (C3). She talks of injecting a sense of fun into her evening sessions, usually via dialogue with the tutor, so that “it just makes it more light-hearted and the time goes doesn’t it?” (C3). The sense of levity and brightness would seem to contrast vividly with the austerity of her childhood and it is the sensory aspects of light, colour, and emotion that are elicited to represent a sense of belonging; belonging here as freedom, away from the strictures of a rule-based and authoritarian lifestyle.

In working to move away from her own past, to come to terms with it, and to create a greater sense of freedom for her children, Ellen’s metaphorical imagery

offers a poignant testimony to the potentiality of individuals to re-fashion their lives; the artefact has a place within her home as a constant reminder of the play of light on the water. As a student, Ellen feels liberated and young, not perhaps once more, but for the first time; belonging then for Ellen is premised on how the university experience makes her feel. She is re-constructing her own life in regard to her faith and her upbringing, and the university course is integral to such a transformation. We discuss the graduate attribute of 'critical thinker' which contrasts with her own childhood unquestioning obedience and her own journey is clearly signalled:

You end up being very vulnerable, don't you?

(L: yes)

If you don't, erm, question things

So yeah, I feel like

And I know university's normally a stage

That you go through, isn't it?

You know

When you're probably late teens, early twenties

I feel like I've gone back to that stage

(C2)

Engagement of this participant is more than a notional attendance at lectures and a regular submission of assignments. It lays bare the intimacy of the connection that she has with her studies; it is personal, unseen, and so unrecognised by those who would seek to measure her level of student engagement, or indeed, her sense of belonging, via involvement with the broader university life; as she tells me: "I've got a lot of other things going on in my life" (C1).

### *Making memories*

My final narrator lives on campus and yet, despite using the university facilities, such as the gym, the student union building, and the social spaces, Lauren has found times of loneliness and boredom. Living away from home, Lauren, as a young, white student, studying on an early childhood degree, narrates her stories to portray a picture of a slower pace of life as a university student. It is perhaps the physicality that is different; at home, Lauren is active and spends a lot of her time out of the house while at university she can be confined to her room and not speak to anyone all day. In talking of being at home, Lauren tells me: "I love going back cos er, I'm always busy, there's always somebody to see or the dogs to walk in the nice . . . the nice, fields or something, so, it's really nice to go back. I'm never bored when I go back" (C1). The aspects of loneliness and boredom run counter to the populist discourse of student life and represent a genuine concern for the lifeworld of the student. The busyness of university life, envisaged by Lauren, is not realised; I learn in our final conversation that Lauren had expected a campus 'feel' such as that depicted in American films: "if you walk through a college campus in America, you can see all the people dotted about laughing" (C3). In contrast, the availability of social spaces to engage with others is compounded by her limited monies; she is pragmatic in her use of campus food and drinks outlets: "I've got everything I need in the kitchen, so . . . I just see it as wasting a bit of money when I've got the stuff already" (C1). However, lack of monies affects the ability to socialise with others "and then missing out on that kind of sets you back a bit because they've already gone out, they've already made memories and things" (C3). For Lauren, *making memories* is key to

friendships and to feelings of belonging. The following is a resulting thread of thoughts storied via reflection during photo-elicitation:

I love making memories  
I prefer making memories  
Than drinking every night sort of thing

If we spend all day in the library  
We'll remember that in years to come  
It'll be like cool

Because if I make memories with somebody  
I will always remember them  
And they'll always, you know  
Mean something.

Cos I'll always be connected back home  
Because of the memories I've got there  
But I'll always be connected here now  
Because of the memories I've got here

The necessity to spend time with others, to share experiences, and to recall these at a later date is the way in which Lauren builds her connection to both place and to people. The loneliness of Lauren's student lifeworld has compounded her ability to develop a sense of belonging built on *making memories*. The "practicing of place" (Raffaeta and Duff, 2013, p.343) is denied her in her campus environment; aspects of sociality, materiality and affectivity are differently configured to her more rural familial setting so that an existential disconnect is felt by her. The stereotyped image of alcohol-related student happiness is one that Lauren does not share; interestingly it is mention of the library that is made here, focusing on the purpose of her having come to university; to work towards becoming a teacher.

I learn through my conversations with this narrator that the military was her first choice of career route but that health issues precluded such an option. The camaraderie to be found within the Armed Forces is well-known and often emphasised within recruitment advertising campaigns; indeed, recent marketing has foregrounded the concept of belonging (British Army, 2017). The metaphor of an “obstacle course” (C1) is raised early on to depict Lauren’s time as a student and I appreciate the military links when I have come to know her better. The metaphor is used, however, to demonstrate her determination to succeed, much like Parr’s (1998) students who saw obstacles as something to be overcome, not to halt progress. I am reminded of my youth service experiences, taking young women to army assault courses, where the aim was to build self-belief based on the cooperation with others, literally helping each other to get over the wall and up the cargo nets. For Lauren, her resilience to the task is equally focused; she reflects on her decision to become a student:

I can move away to uni  
And it’ll be fine

But it’s been  
It’s like  
It’s like erm  
An obstacle course  
It’s been like an obstacle course  
Some easy bits  
Where you just wanna go off track  
And take the easy road

But...I’ve decided,  
I’m gonna stick it out *[Laughs]*  
Cos I’m looking forward to doing my research  
(L: Yes) *[Laughs]*

Yes, really looking forward to starting that off (C1)



Again, the focus moves from a military flavour of an obstacle course to the rigours of academic study. The benefits of participation within my research study have been marketed as useful for participants' own future research, and I wonder to what extent Lauren is using this mention in ironic terms, or whether the challenge of research presents itself as yet a further obstacle. Scrutinising the transcript, I find that subsequent discussion of her research as the 'independent study' seemed to have sparked notions of loneliness on the campus, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, so that I diverted conversation away from this to avoid causing upset to my narrator (BERA, 2011).

In her final conversation, Lauren stories herself as one who loves to laugh and be 'silly' with her friends; photographs show her 'Snap Chat' images of her student friends towards the end of seminar activities in the classroom: "It just adds a bit of fun to the lectures . . . I do like to have a laugh with people" (C3). This intimacy of sharing of emotions is how belonging is articulated and experienced for this narrator, who at home shares a room with her two sisters and which seems far removed from earlier talk of having to spend time alone, in her room, by herself. Also within this third conversation, Lauren informs me that she has contacted a locally-based military-linked national organisation as a way of continuing activities she undertook before moving away from home to become a student. In this way, I find that Lauren has fulfilled her potentiality to extend her social field and seems far happier in her general demeanour; the Snap Chat photos are testimony to this. Just as Nadia found resolution to enhance her well-being, so too, Lauren would seem to also have found her way. I cannot know to

what extent reflection via this research study may have been influential as regrettably I did not meet with Lauren for a follow-up conversation. My interpretation of her stories, therefore, except where co-constructed within the conversations, remains my own.

### Reflecting on meaning

I wish to consider the meaning that can be made from these three metaphors: a *bubble*, the *sea and play of the light* and *making memories* before moving on to the final section of this chapter. I find the temporal dimension is located within each of these metaphors. They also bear witness to ideas represented within earlier narrators' metaphors; those notions of security, freedom, and collegiality. The transparency and fragility of a *bubble*, floating along the life course of the undergraduate experience, or at least the second year experience for Chloe, offers an image of collective survival, sharing the toil of study with others. However, for Chloe, the choice to 'break free' is an important factor; interdependency vies with notions of dependency, where the latter is seen as restrictive. Just as she has had to 'take' the freedom from her placement class teacher, so Chloe's growing sense of belonging or feeling 'settled', equips her to use her initiative, and to make demands. The ability of Chloe to articulate her thoughts both in the placement and in the HE classroom echoes democratic processes whereby voice can be used to negotiate ways forward. For me, the reciprocal qualities of belonging are highlighted within this rendering of the construct; that is, the expectation that a two-way process inheres within it.

The evocation of past and continuing holidays with sun, sea and light make for an immersed and highly personal concept of belonging for Ellen, exemplified by her stained glass artefact, where freedom offers the key to a new life. And it is the university experience that is integral to such change. For Ellen, belonging is intertwined with youthfulness and the confirmation of an understanding sought after, and now sated, via the knowledge of other ways of being, and of upbringing, which is extended to her own children. The “narrative histories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 31) of Ellen are unfolded to reveal the temporal dimensions that dominate her storying of a movement from a narrow imposed worldview to a movement towards (Quinn, 2010) greater self-fulfilment, freedom and knowing; a belonging, or perhaps a longing to be, echoed in ideas offered by Frenk (2016) in the literature review, wherein are suggested the transcendent qualities that seem to be held dear by this narrator.

Past events and lived experience are given meaning by Lauren within her individual branding of belonging as *making memories*. The present is sustained by recollections of the past and a looking forward to when future events and experiences will be similarly stored; a tapestry of lived moments woven into the fabric of belonging to place and to people. For Lauren, this privileges aspects of laughter and happiness, much as that depicted by images of the American college campus; a place peopled by memories. In contrast, her existential days of loneliness and boredom seem reminiscent of Ahmed’s (2010) ‘melancholic migrant’ whose disjuncture with the past continues to be re-written on daily experience. Civic engagement with a local organisation finally provides the belonging that

Lauren seeks, providing the aspects of sociality, materiality and affectivity (Raffaeta and Duff, 2013) that are meaningful to her.

#### Metaphorical conceptual understandings of belonging

I have examined the articulations of belonging privileged within this study in order to establish a nuanced understanding of the concept of belonging, illuminated by the metaphors used. I interpret the metaphors, based upon co-constructed understanding within conversations with narrators, to discern their entailments to see how understandings are conceptually shaped. I wish to posit that the articulations of belonging, as voiced by these narrators, offer a range of meanings, which can illuminate the ways in which student belonging might be re-imagined.

Entailments are the characteristics that are highlighted within a metaphor which arise from the beliefs about, and experiences of, the abstract concept in question (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). The following chart (FIG 6) gives an overview of the entailments drawn from my narrators' metaphors. I have interpreted these by means of close examination of the excerpts offered, and my accompanying discussion, offered within the earlier sections of this chapter; while I have endeavoured to privilege perceived meanings of my narrators, I acknowledge my own subjectivity in the selections made, and like Chase (2005, 2011) claim sole responsibility for the products of my interpretations.

<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Entailments drawn from the metaphor: Belonging is.....</b>
The Embrace:	holding, valuing, wanting, attending to, nurturing, noticing, security, accepting
The Life Boat:	hard work, collective action, pursuing goals, movement away/ towards, togetherness, mutual understanding, helping, valuing, life-giving/-saving
The Support System	reciprocity, noticing, accepting, reassuring, availability, shared worries, companionship, mutual understanding, mutual support, accommodating emotions, enabling, valuing
Cracking the Shell	opening up, taking risks, having courage, growth and development, getting to know others, expression and sharing of feelings, trusting self and others, responsibility, acceptance and understanding (not having to clarify self), making connections
A Bubble	collegiality, sharing feelings, comforting, mutuality, transient, safety, fragile, encompassing choice, containing weight of constant stress, recognising similarities, offering transparency, a survival/ coping mechanism, two-way exchange
The Sea and Play of the Light	self-made, freedom, transformative, intimacy, personal, youthful, reflective, developmental, evoking memories, a way to feel alive, an aesthetic experience, self-awareness, fun
Making Memories	self-made, giving meaning, personal, temporal, spending time with others, affective, fun, being connected, permanent

FIG 6: Entailments drawn from narrators' metaphors of belonging

The entailments provide an organisation of important belonging experiences that have been highlighted within the choice of metaphors. The diversity of the metaphorical structural understandings can be seen within the entailments and I wish to focus on some of the similarities while privileging also the areas of difference in order to draw conclusions from this research study. The aspect of diversity is important in order to strengthen the phenomenon of belonging; that is, to acknowledge that it is understood in a variety of ways, based on experiences

lived within a temporal dimension and set within a complex array of ecological contexts.

As an abstract concept, belonging does not have clearly delineated boundaries; it does not exist as an entity but as a relational construct that is contingent upon context. For Lakoff and Johnson (2003), our understanding is based upon metaphorical conceptual structuring since although abstract concepts can be “*experienced* directly, none of them can be fully comprehended on their own terms. Instead, we must understand them in terms of other entities and experiences, typically other *kinds* of entities and experiences... – that is, understanding via metaphor” (pp. 177-178, original emphases). The conventional metaphor relies upon a shared understanding that is culturally acknowledged, whereas the nonconventional metaphor has the potential to encourage alternative ways of understanding, highlighting aspects not usually given attention (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003):

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to.

(Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 145)

I wish to posit that the narrators’ metaphors in this study offer new insights into ways of understanding belonging within the HE landscape. Metaphorical conceptual structuring of belonging, drawn from the entailments, highlights aspects of security and adventure; of ‘being held’ and of ‘breaking free.’ I shall

discuss each in turn as a way to consider what may be taken from this study in terms of articulations of belonging.

The privileging of security is shown in the many entailments to do with acceptance, safety, valuing, noticing and mutual understanding. The *embrace* embodies the aspect of security. One of the fears of undergraduates is not that they will not be able to cope with the academic work, but that they may not be able to make friends (Thomas, 2012, Project 2; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The security offered by getting to know others and, more importantly, by becoming known by others, provides a way of journeying through the HE landscape together. The security of 'being held' (Josselson, 1996), emotionally, offers a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1979) from which to 'break free' and move; move towards the attainment of personal and professional goals. The strong sense of conceptual structuring around such a view of security is a feature of these narrators' metaphors. Interestingly, the positive impact of friends and peers is not recognised by some staff and students (Thomas, 2012) and, although seen to be supportive, their value in helping students to remain on the course and to achieve is not appreciated. The recognition of mutual student support is an aspect that is clearly signalled within the metaphorical conceptual structurings in this study. I want to emphasise the value that this can have for our students. For staff, it is one thing to instrumentally provide group work in class but quite another to understand and appreciate the value of such connectedness for student reassurance and well-being. In addition, the need for our students to appreciate how coming together with others can enhance both their student experience, as

well as their potential level of achievement, is an aspect that seems under-reported. The ability to know, and be known by, others offers students a secure base from which to navigate the HE landscape; a reciprocity, couched in ecological terms, whereby nested parts within the system have the potential to influence each other, and so transform, and be transformed by, others.

To illustrate this further, I wish to draw upon the metaphor of the *life boat*. The *lifeboat* offers a poignant image of the collective action of women who are determined to achieve their goals. Aboard the emergency vessel, they propel themselves to a place where success is possible, in spite of structural inequities, both within the university and within society. The belonging is borne of expediency and necessity; I see this as reflecting Young's (1990) sentiment that interests of diverse persons will coalesce around shared interests in order to create new possibilities. The collaborative nature of this metaphor echoes the "supportive peer relations" (Thomas, 2012), offered as the institutional approach to belonging, but it is more than that; it demonstrates a resolve to overcome the oppression of gender and to attain freedom of choice. Belonging is shown here as a way to ease the journeying, to share the enormity of the task, and to make possible the view of greater equality as it beckons from the distant shore. Belonging as a conceptual understanding is metaphorically revealed here as shaped by the social norms, which can limit the personal goals of mature women who are mothers. Belonging is seen here as a sense of solidarity as a means to secure belonging within wider society; to take their places as professional women.



In contrast, the *sea and play of the light* metaphor does not rely on other students for the belonging it reflects. It offers a potent and deeply-felt transformative element whereby a life is being re-fashioned by its connection to the academic world of knowledge. The ecology of the narrator influences the type of belonging that is required; it is private and waits to be found amid the emotionally charged spaces (Sagan, 2008) of a spent childhood. The intimacy of the quest is total; the courage to pursue such a search for meaning (Paget, 1983) is supported by the content of the academic programme and by people outside of the institution. It is a sense of belonging within the narrator's life that has been facilitated by the decision to become an undergraduate. I feel privileged to have been invited into this metaphor. It resonates with my own childhood authoritarian upbringing but also my years of living on the coast; despite its privacy, I feel able to enter into the depths of its texture and I am captivated by the way in which the metaphor exemplifies the diversity and richness of meanings around the topic of belonging. For this narrator, the university provides the route to her belonging in her wider life space. For me, I become aware of how the strength of a story can impact on researcher sensibilities and so influence interpretive processes. I also begin to see that belonging for me may have similar meaning.

The security of 'being held' allows risk-taking behaviours. Far from the image of the migrant who does not feel able to be identified, for fear of being seen to be out of place (Hardwick, 2014), the negative framing of the non-traditional student is challenged within the metaphorical conceptual structuring of these narrators. The deficit reading of the migrant becomes here the migrant as one who seeks

adventure and fulfilment; the one who takes risks to achieve personal and professional goals. Migrant as the go-getter, as the explorer. The ability and desire to 'break free' are influenced by a sense of being held that can let go; too tight a hold demonstrates lack of trust. Affirming the potentiality of the individual affords space for growth and development.

The agentic role of the narrator to create a sense of belonging is noteworthy. I see it in the *lifeboat* where collective action of each woman paddling in a "last ditch attempt" moves the boat forward; the ongoing creation of the *support system* to provide ways for mutual sustenance; *cracking the shell* is a self-determining action; a *bubble* is designed for mutual coping of stress factors but its fragility is equally important in order to break free; the *sea and play of the light* is literally created by the narrator and comes 'alive' when she actively holds it to the light; and the conscious effort to *make memories* from time spent with others that will lend a sense of belonging along the temporal spectrum. These metaphors, each in their own unique way, testify to the determination of the task. The narrators do not wait for belonging to be provided for them; they use the social and cultural resources available to them, drawing on factors within their own ecologies to guide them. In psychological terms, the yearning to belong is strongly felt and offers well-being. But, it is not entered into lightly; it is deeply rooted within the lifeworld of the narrator. These narrators demonstrate their creativity and initiative in developing a sense of belonging for themselves in order to 'break free'.

The image of the go-getter is a dynamic one, demonstrating capacity and individual agency, whereby assets within the lifeworld of the narrator are used, or re-invented, to address the task of navigating the HE landscape. The FGS of this study appreciate the requirement of the graduate status within the world of contemporary employment and so they muster the courage and resolve to acquire it; obstacles to be overcome, intrapersonal strengths to be discovered and utilised, and interpersonal relationships to be forged and prized. And yet somehow, such “common motivations” (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009, p. 620) can be seen to be high-jacked by an institutionally-defined construct named ‘belonging’. The colonising process is underway to objectify the commodity of an HE qualification and what and how a student must be in order to achieve; success needs to be measured and quantified in order to provide evidence-based metrics. For me, this negates the input of the student, the self-determining motivation to succeed, and the sacrifices that will necessarily be made along the way. It serves to reinforce the negative framing of the non-traditional student.

The interconnectedness of belonging, as offered within these metaphorical conceptual structurings, privileges the ecological nature of the phenomenon. As in ecological systems thinking, the ability of meanings to shape, and be shaped by, other meanings offers a view of belonging with seemingly limitless possibilities. I used the work of Case (2007) to conceptualise six relationships that the student wishes to belong to in terms of: one’s studies; the broader university life; the home; the career; one’s classmates; and the lecturer. I presented Becky’s narrative to exemplify how strengthening the connections between Case’s (2007)

'relationships' had the potential to strengthen the phenomenon, in this case that of belonging. This is in keeping with systems thinking whereby "the best way to optimize the system is to improve the relationships among its parts, not to optimize each part separately" (Stroh, 2015, p.35). I argue this as a way to making visible for the student, and for staff, those hidden contours that delineate a personalised sense of belonging, in all its guises.

Each personalised articulation of belonging draws upon individual lived experience set within a range of contexts. I have shown, by use of the metaphors based on personal narratives, the ways in which the ecologies of these narrators offer affordances conducive to university study. That is, these narrators bring with them assets from their own lifeworlds which can be utilised to support their success. A reciprocal task for the university is to envisage how such assets, or affordances, might be recognised, and valued, within the arena of the HE institution, in order that connections might be more readily visible and so established by staff and students.

To return for a final time to the metaphor of the *sea and play of the light*: the artefact on which the metaphor is based is said by the narrator to be "uninteresting" until it is held up to the light; it only "comes alive" when held in a particular way, in relation to the light. I wish to push this further in terms of the topic of student belonging, which is otherwise offered as a strategic means to support students to be successful:

....we stand on the precipice of radical change that has not been attempted in any other country. In light of the higher student tuition fees, what will

encourage students to participate in higher education, and reinforce their decision to stay and enable them to make the most of the opportunity they have selected? This study finds that belonging will go a long way to achieving these outcomes.

(Thomas, 2012, p.72)

Belonging in terms of an institutionally-defined construct may be well intentioned but, since it is required to be monitored, measured, and analysed, it is difficult to see how the articulations of the narrators of this study might be accommodated. A series of metrics based on performance data, follow-up action, and looking out for 'at-risk' students may make for "uninteresting" reading. And often, of course, what we look for is what we find. In contrast, the narrator of this metaphor is emphatic that "when you put it up to the light it comes alive doesn't it?" This study has similarly held up to the light the stories of its narrators which, in turn, have been refracted out as metaphors, through the prism that is their individual lifeworld. I use the term 'refracted' as the metaphors are all different, highlighting specific aspects of lived experience as are perceived to be valuable to each narrator. The light shines on each in a different way, emphasising differing aspects and so providing a diverse range of personally-held understandings of the construct.

This chapter has provided detailed excerpts from my gathered data, presented in ways that are intended to invite the reader into the lives of my narrators, and into the interpretation process. I have focused upon the articulations of belonging in these pages to provide unique authored renderings of the construct, drawn from personal ecologies. I have chosen to privilege the metaphors that have been offered since they provide conduits to the narrators' understandings; a means to express a concept whose contours may not be readily visible, and which is

differently configured depending on context. Within the metaphorical inquiry space (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), the dimensions of temporality, personal-social and place give form to the phenomenon; in this case, to the construct of belonging.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions**

Having arrived at the end of my study, I already feel a sense of loss. I have journeyed with my seven narrators and have felt a connection to them, and to their stories of belonging. Each has worked with me within a person-centred methodological approach to create an articulation of belonging that is personal to them, discursively constructed according to their own needs, their own ecological framing. This is the 'niche' that I foreground within this research study; a space wherein diversity, a person-centred valuing and a sense of belonging can coalesce in order to create the possibility for human endeavour and fulfilment. Respectful working has been a main tenet of this study and I offer it as a way forward for future working, to value those we encounter and to trust in the potentiality of the individual.

This study has set out to examine the ways in which the lifeworlds of a small number of second year undergraduate FGS within a post-1992 university impact their sense of engagement with the university and how these same FGS articulate their sense of belonging. At the beginning of this study, I shared my story of the two night-shift workers who were coming onto campus for a full day of lectures. I was curious to hear the stories of other students in order that their lifeworlds might be acknowledged, and so recognised, amid the burgeoning negative framing that would seem to exist within the literature of the non-traditional HE student. The discourse provided by such a negative framing offers its own metaphors; I have used those of 'migrant' and the 'colonised', based on the study by Mann (2001). The metaphors offered within this research study are couched in

the narrators' articulations of belonging; that is, the study affords the chance for narrators to author alternative stories in regard to the discourse surrounding the non-traditional student, here identified as FGS.

Reflecting upon my study, I find that my methodological framework has offered a facilitative climate for the building of ethical and respectful working with my narrators. It has provided the means for mutual recognition as well as for mutual vulnerability; this has been important for an authentic exchange and a space conducive to co-constructed meanings. Much of the literature on belonging within HE is focused on entry into university, at the transition stage. My study focuses on second year FGS as a way to provide insights into the lifeworld of the student once they are studying within the institution. In addition, I have used a combination of creative strategies to elicit ways of talking about engagement and belonging, to 'free' the voices of my narrators where the topic of conversation has centred on an intangible and contested construct. Such a methodological approach adds to the originality of this study and has enabled the voices of my narrators to take centre stage, privileging participatory ways of working, and so strengthening the voice of the student within researched material on the topics of engagement and belonging.

A person-centred philosophy based on core conditions of unconditional positive regard, congruence and empathy (Rogers, 1990; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) seeks to work respectfully and ethically with others; it does not seek to limit or constrain the potential of the individual, as does a deficit-framing perspective. I



have employed a person-centred approach as a means to value the narrators within this study as experts on their own lives; as a way to affirm their resources for self-understanding and for knowing what is required to succeed. In his therapeutic work, Rogers (1990) focuses on the attitudes of the therapist rather than the skills set. I find this to be a worthy focus as a way to build trust and rapport with others. Interestingly, the 'climate' envisaged by Rogers (1990) seeks to help parents and teachers to:

...find the conditions which would increase the capacity for personal choice, for self-direction, for spontaneity and creativity, for independence, for flexibility...In short, by establishing these conditions, we would tend to bring about the likelihood that individuals could not be shaped by controllers.

(Rogers, 1990, pp. 120-121)

Having worked with my narrators in such a way, I am convinced that the potentiality of the whole person is revealed. Indeed, I am struck by the similarities here to attributes held to encompass a sense of belonging, highlighted within the literature review, and within the metaphorical conceptual understandings of my narrators. A student-centred pedagogy has been mooted as a way forward within HE practices but instrumentalist mechanisms to 'control' and 'shape' students appear to offer a 'quick fix' remedy. I posit that adherence to a person-centred philosophy, valuing the 'whole person' (Rogers, 1990; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994) would propel HE working to afford an authentic sense of belonging, or connectedness, in its students, and its staff, and would lead to 'ontological engagement' (Barnett and Coate, 2005) to "achieve the development of changing persons, persons with a greater degree of self-confidence in directing themselves....It would produce an open, changing kind of society"(Rogers, 1990,

p.121). Such sentiments are reminiscent of the ideas of Young (1990), whose work I introduced early on as a conceptual framing for this study, in which the “unoppressive city .....[where]...City life is the 'being-together' of strangers” (pp. 317-318) testifies to the valuing of diversity, without the need to homogenise and standardise a population.

Based upon a person-centred philosophy, my study has provided an holistic understanding of the contemporary FGS, as reflected in the lifeworlds of my narrators. I wished to uncover the lifeworlds of students as whole persons, not merely ‘economic assets’ as constructed within a marketised HE landscape. The ways in which the lifeworld of the student impacts their engagement with the university is the topic of my first research question and it has been explored indirectly within the metaphors already discussed, and included within narrative excerpts. To my surprise, it was the sheer resolve and motivation to succeed that I found in response to this research question. Tempered no doubt by the changing demographic of the student body, and in particular the FGS, I was originally expecting to learn mainly of the multi-faceted and complex responsibilities undertaken by my narrators, to do with childcare and employment; such is the power of the discourse to offer taken-for-granted assumptions which can influence staff views negatively towards students (Zyngier, 2008).

I feel ashamed of my surprise; duped by hegemonic perceptions despite my experiential knowing of students’ commitment to study, as demonstrated by the two night-shift workers. The lifeworlds of the participants of this study have

offered varying motivations to succeed. For example, the *life boat* of Becky testifies to the positive impact of her ecological context; rather than be dissuaded by the obstacles in her path, she is determined to succeed as failure is not an option for her. Such factors demand recognition, I would argue, as a means to understand our students and to acknowledge and value the efforts they make to achieve their goals. These detailed, voiced articulations provide deep-felt understandings of personal lifeworlds in relation to their engagement with the university and I argue that they require our recognition in order that we can work effectively, and respectfully, to support student success.

In addition, narrators' stories have offered compelling evidence of the struggles to overcome traditional gender relations, class divisions and embedded ethnic differences. The presence of students within HE struggling against such barriers is witness to their resolve, and to their motivation to succeed. It is their resistance to such overarching factors that convinces me of the strengths they bring with them into HE; strengths of personal agency and determination to overcome obstacles. My concern, however, is that such agency and resolve are framed negatively by a traditional HE system which requires adherence to institutionally sanctioned ways of being and thinking. Social and cultural resources of the student are unknown or unvalued, or both. Arguments within the literature that identify the need for non-traditional students to acquire suitable cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1977) deny those capitals, or strengths, that students bring with them; and by ignoring them, it is my contention that we reinforce the deficit framing of the non-traditional student. Diversity is suppressed and, despite 'sameness' not equating to

equality (Thompson, 2011), institutionally, we seem to expect diverse students to adopt the same habits of study so they can be measured and assessed.

The notion of stipulating what it means to be an HE student and how success might be achieved has aggrieved me since the beginning of this study. I have been concerned about the colonising process whereby students are told how they need to behave in order to be a student, and how to succeed. It might be argued that FGS should be dissuaded from enrolling within HE if they are to believe the negative framing of them; the expectations of them are low. I am confounded, then, by notions of 'managing student expectations' (Bryson and Hardy, 2012) which seem to mean that the institution is required to inform students of what is expected of the incoming student. Viewed as a constraining process, a colonising narrative which offers one navigational path through HE to success, I am beginning to be convinced that the personal agency and determination of FGS to overcome obstacles, in ways particular to the individual, as so vividly portrayed within the *lifeboat* metaphor, may resist such pressure to conform. Just as one of my narrators talks of having to "take the freedom", so FGS will seek to find ways of operationalising their own sense of freedom, as students. Sadly, this may be interpreted institutionally as resistance. Their resolve, however, has perhaps already overcome expectations to with gender, class and ethnicity, so that resisting further perceived limiting ways of being may offer a continued route to success for FGS. I would argue that, as an HE sector, however, we need not be contributing to yet further barriers to be overcome by our students.

Founded upon a need to fit the metrics – to do with such factors as attendance, retention, progression and completion, and participation in informal and autonomous learning (Thomas, 2012, pp.66-68) - not only does a prescribed way of behaving to secure success indicate a certain mistrust of the student but it also assumes a one-size fits all. And yet it is the diversity of the new demographic of students that is highlighted as its main feature; the rhetoric of the need to embrace diversity for the richness it can offer is denied by a process that I conclude is a way of reinforcing traditional ways of being and working. Indicators of academic engagement are measured and analysed in order to establish the engagement levels of the student. While I appreciate the need for students to have HE study processes de-mystified (Burke, 2012), the stories of my narrators point to many aspects of engagement that cannot be observed, or indeed known about; and as such, they cannot be measured. Deficit framing, therefore, is based upon our own deficiency and under-valuing of knowing what our students bring with them into HE. This study has tentatively sought to remedy such a perspective. The study offers evidence of wider life frames of our students, which serve to impact, both positively and negatively, their institutionally-sanctioned engagement with the university, and so their perceived sense of belonging. The study furthers my experiential knowing and offers knowing couched in the voices of the narrators themselves. The narratives offer an illumination of lived experience; that is knowledge derived from in-depth exchanges as a way to understand more fully (Paget, 1983).

It has been argued that student engagement has recently been re-branded as belonging (Zepke, 2015) within the What Works? project (Thomas, 2012). In pursuance of earlier mention of institutionally-approved ways of being a student, the concept of belonging is potentially more worrying; I am concerned about the broader colonising potential afforded by a tapping into the basic human psychological need to belong. Within the landscape of a marketised HE sector, based upon the need to retain our students, belonging can be seen as a seductive tool to win hearts and minds of incoming students. The politics of affect (Thrift, 2004) has been seen to wield considerable influence, especially within a performative arena, where 'showing' we care about students can project emotional affinity which may not be there. Just as marketing strategies and cult organisations may employ aspects of belonging to 'lock in' its members, the sinister side of belonging as the possessive offers a less acceptable face as a branding tool. Early identification of 'at risk' students – at risk of withdrawing from the university – and the need to counsel them off the course, before attrition rates are calculated, offers a clear example of how belonging is tied, inextricably, to the system of metrics whereby universities are assessed in terms of quality performance.

My principal contention, then, is that aspects of student belonging, most recently elaborated by Thomas (2012) and Thomas *et al.* (2017), may be usefully enriched by a focus upon the affective dimensions of belonging, as depicted within the varied metaphors of these narrators. This study has sought to foreground affect and the ways in which it is necessarily entwined with the construct of belonging.

Metaphorical conceptual understandings drawn from the narrators within this study have provided a range of aspects encompassing personal and deeply-rooted emotions and feelings. Such affective dimensions are influenced by the ecologies of the narrators so that belonging is discursively constructed and not necessarily situated within the university itself; for example, the *lifeboat* reveals the search for belonging within the wider society, while the *sea and play of the light* searches for belonging within an individual life space. In addition, the *support system* demonstrates a strong emotional holding of the student within a home that knows nothing of the HE arena. This is a significant factor and emphasises the ecological nature of belonging; the interconnections within nested contexts that can lend support to the individual within unfamiliar contexts.

My second research question centres on how students articulate their sense of belonging. I have chosen to focus my response to this question by means of narrators' metaphors so providing a textured commentary to illuminate the understandings of my narrators. The diversity of the metaphors, offering a nuanced articulation of the construct of belonging, constitutes its strength although I realise this is problematic within a framework wherein the construct needs to be reduced to a measurable commodity. As a contribution, however, to the "consultable record" (Geertz, 1973, p. 30) of what is known about belonging as a pathway to student success, this study offers a challenge to the negative framing of FGS. I have drawn out the richness of the metaphors to show a demonstrable overcoming of obstacles; a courage and resolve to find the path to success. The study provides a disjuncture to the habitual storyline (Abma, 1999)

of the non-traditional student and provides impetus to the need to reflect upon how we work with non-traditional students and to how we ourselves engage; with students, and colleagues, inclusive of those in leadership positions, in order to negotiate ways forward within our own institutions. Diversity offers a wide array of possibilities; reducing these to a narrowly-defined construct may fit the need for the purposes of measurement but it does not capture the rich diversity of the phenomenon.

A focus on the affective domain has been privileged within this study. Building upon Thomas' (2012) ways of fostering belonging, I wish to emphasise the complexity of the task, also more recently acknowledged within the literature (Thomas *et al.*, 2017); I draw attention to those spaces between people that can get in the way of supportive and meaningful relationships. The 'vexed spaces' of Treacher (2006) have been highlighted as unpredictable locales of "psychic traffic" (Sagan, 2008, p.182) that offer existential difficulties in the building of rapport between individuals, and groups. That is not to suggest we, as university staff, should not attempt to bring the social into the academic (Thomas, 2012); I have undertaken this advice and found it to be useful, but the dynamics of working with people can be complex and problematic. We can easily ride roughshod over people's sensibilities without even recognising having done it. As noted within this study, the invisibility and centrality of the construct infers that a sense of belonging becomes meaningful only when it is not experienced; empathic understanding of this aspect of the construct is a pre-requisite to recognising its 'contours'.



Belonging is constructed in Thomas (2002, 2012) as a structural problem, explicitly not a student deficit, which requires institutional change and transformation (Jones and Thomas, 2005). In contrast, the entailments – those assumptions and characteristics associated with elements within the metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) - offered in this study provide a conduit to the way in which the narrators understand 'a sense of belonging' and I offer them as a contribution to knowledge; a means to our re-thinking the notion of belonging in regard to the FGS. The entailments, influenced by the ecological context of the narrator, lay bare the type of belonging that is required; in turn, becoming aware of such entailments has the potential to change our conceptual understandings, and actions taken in relation to such changed understandings, so offering ways of working more empathically.

My study has clearly signalled the metaphorical conceptual understandings of belonging articulated by my narrators; I choose to highlight the two aspects of security and adventure. That is, 'being held' and 'breaking free'. The strong affective qualities within such metaphorical conceptual structurings point to the ways in which belonging is constructed by these narrators, and how the meaning of belonging is understood by them; qualities to do with being valued, being noticed, and being understood, but also to do with having choices, taking risks, and breaking free. I wish to argue that such affective dimensions are not to be ignored within the institutional framing of belonging as a strategy for success.

My focus upon metaphor within this study and its resultant conceptual structuring to reveal understandings of articulated belonging came late within my research journey. The Prologue (Chapter 4) offered my initial impressions of the research outcomes prior to scrutiny of, and reflection upon, the gathered data. At that time, the troubling of the standard story (Abma, 1999) of FGS, was foreshadowed by my narrators. The motivational fortitude of my narrators was highlighted as was the ability to overcome obstacles in their way to the achievement of personal and professional goals. I make mention of the Prologue at this point to show how far this research has come in terms of the articulations of belonging; whereas my voice was initially privileged, the voices of my narrators have since shaped the conclusions to this research study. The poetic presentation of metaphors of belonging, using words spoken by the narrators, has sought to offer authentic renderings of the construct in ways that contribute to the knowledge of our understandings in an original way.

I have argued that a concept of 'dispersed belonging' might be useful in re-thinking the construct of belonging in order that it might be more widely envisaged. Moving away from a narrow construct affords the chance for greater diversity of understanding of the possibilities that might exist for its instantiation. For example, within this study, belonging is rooted in the personal. It is articulated as situated; that is, it is dependent upon context. Lived experience of feelings of belonging can be transferred from one context to another in order to support the well-being of the individual when in an unfamiliar physical environment. Belonging is also sited within a more abstract sense; feelings can offer belonging within

one's own life space, or within wider society. It can also be sited within the relational space of friendship and family networks wherein the individual is understood by others and so is 'held' emotionally, secure in the knowledge that she is noticed, and valued. Belonging is embodied; it is palpable and yet intangible. It does not inhere within behaviours but in the meanings of behaviours, very much like Geertz's (1973) twitch and wink, outlined in the Methodology chapter. As such, it is difficult to imagine how belonging might be measured or quantified. As a relational construct, it is the quality of the relations that give meaning to the construct as opposed to the quantity of observable behaviours that might suggest belonging. Belonging as an entity is conducive to commodification and measurement; metaphors offered within this study do not lend themselves to behavioural indicators.

Metaphorical conceptual structurings, offered as entailments (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), suggest a strong sense of striving, of reaching out, of moving on. A movement towards self-actualisation which is facilitated by trust and recognition, experienced as 'being held'. I have used the lens of 'migrant' throughout this study and it is time to return once more to this metaphor. Applying a migratory lens to the review of literature has provided a means to incorporate insights into belonging drawn from an interdisciplinary range of literature, moving beyond that of educational studies, so offering perspectives to enhance an understanding of the construct in new ways. Populist discourse offers a negative framing of the migrant, suggesting low skills and a burden upon the host nation; it seems this metaphorical image of the non-traditional student provides a similar discourse,

complete with low intellectual abilities and a need for extra support within the HE institution in order to succeed. And yet, for the narrators within this study, a sense of adventure and a quest for freedom appear to drive their student endeavours. Their engagement in the task is total. Metaphorically, their conceptual understandings of belonging reflect an ability, indeed a yearning, to 'break free', to take risks, to push against the constraints that hold them in place. They become the go-getter, the explorer, the one who strives towards success. While I might argue that such an understanding may also fit that of the migrant, it is not that held within the public consciousness; the conventional conceptual understanding is set within constraints. If it were to change, the life of the migrant may be an easier one.

Contemporary renderings, however, of the concept of migrant are problematic. Ahmed's (2010) happy migrant is one who has achieved this affective state by loyalty to the nation, "in terms of playing its game" (p.122); perceived as in need of direction, lacking the qualities to be happy, the migrant becomes the recipient of Ahmed's (2010, p. 125) 'happiness formula', employed by the colonial power to bring happiness to those who are unhappy. For me, this finds parallels with HE processes to colonise the FGS in terms of behaviour, expectations, and ways to achieve success; that is, happiness. While I do not dispute that FGS will wish to achieve success, such success will also contribute to institutional success in terms of economic assets and statistical kudos. My concern is that FGS' personal agency and determination, manifested as creativity and initiative, which have the potential to offer success to the student, may be thwarted by a more regulated, imposed

and unfamiliar road map. As noted earlier, resistance to such practices may be read as reinforcing the student as problem; or worse, holding on to former ways of being, as the melancholic migrant (Ahmed, 2010), so constituting a threat to the happiness of others. In short, observable, behavioural indicators which attest to the happiness, or assimilation, of the student, may work to jeopardise and disparage more familiar ways of working that bring success to the non-traditional student. Monitoring for 'at risk' students via such a system may only add to the constraints of the student rather than enhance their potential to succeed.

New metaphors have the potential to change reality, influencing our actions and perceptions in regard to the topic in question (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Non-traditional students who give meaning to their understanding of belonging that emphasises their agency and capacity can work more productively to achieving their goals. Equally important, I would argue, HE staff and personnel who comprehend the meaning of student belonging in terms of these metaphorical conceptual structurings will have the opportunity to revise negative perceptions of the non-traditional student, or to interrogate unconscious bias. Beginning to act, or behave, in terms of this new 'reality' of the non-traditional student can serve to reinforce the conceptual understanding, to 'mainstream' it so that it becomes the new 'standard story' (Abma, 1999), the new "organizational context" (Abma, 1999, p. 183). Or indeed, to suggest that a 'single story', posing as 'standard story' is no longer appropriate.

A changed and positive range of stories has the potential to influence staff attitudes and institutional practices. In turn, it can affirm non-traditional students and impact those supportive peer- and meaningful staff-student relations (Thomas, 2012). Such influences operate within ecological systems thinking to engender changes within a system, and Case's (2007) six relationships – to one's studies, to the broader university life, to home, to the career, to one's classmates and to the lecturer – offered similar sites of connectivity within the lifeworlds of my narrators within this study. I have demonstrated the possibilities of strengthening feelings of belonging by making visible the links between Case's (2007) parts rather than seeking to strengthen each part separately (Stroh, 2015). This offers a diversity of connections that can accommodate the preferences and needs of our students in a multiplicity of ways; the strength of the resulting connections is enhanced by their diverse nature. The dimension of affect has been articulated as deeply embedded within the construct of belonging. The link to intellect in the production of learning (Josselson, 1996) supports earlier argument that belonging enhances student success. My narrators have highlighted the significance of the affective dimension within their articulations. Issues of measuring indicators of success make affect a problematic feature within a metrics-led quality framework but I wish to emphasise how affect has been foregrounded within this study as key to belonging.

As a coda to this section (Labov and Waletzky, 1967), bringing the reader back to where I began this study, it may be interesting to return once more to my two night-shift workers to assess to what extent their lifeworlds impact their

engagement with the university. An institutionally-framed perspective may view them as ill-prepared for a day's study, fatigued and distracted before they begin, and having to leave before the end of a session. Measuring indicators of engagement such as time on task, response to questions in class, interaction with peers, and levels of enthusiasm to the topic may reveal low scores. However, in light of information gleaned within this study, drivers of personal agency and determination to attend in spite of myriad responsibilities in other contexts of their lifeworlds may support a differing perspective; leaving early may demonstrate the freedom to have made the choices necessary to support their own learning and sense of well-being.

This study builds on the considerable work of Thomas (2012) and Thomas *et al.* (2017) and recognises the many varied interventions undertaken by individual researchers to further the understanding of student success. I wish to celebrate the resourcefulness of the narrators within this study to strive so convincingly towards success in their own ways. Having listened to narrators' stories, I wish to reiterate the value of person-centred working that acknowledges and affirms the potentiality of the individual student.

#### Implications of the study

The findings of this study support the importance of the affective dimension for teaching-learning within HE as a way to engage the 'whole person'; the significance of empathy is particularly highlighted. The bringing together of affect and intellect for productive learning is well-documented (Dewey, 1938; Josselson,

1996; Morgan and Saxton, 1991, 2006; Skidmore, 2006) and my narrators have emphasised the emotional aspects that contribute to their sense of belonging within their relationship to the university.

My own empathy regarding students has been enhanced as a result of conducting this research study. Insights gleaned from the entailments have provided me with a wider understanding of the student lifeworld and an appreciation of its challenges. I have learned that it is not 'what' I do to engage or to foster a sense of belonging but 'how' I interact with students; the values of person-centred working underpin such practices. I have worked within my staff team to share aspects of this doctoral study to enhance empathic working to engage students in the teaching-learning process and to establish a facilitative classroom 'climate'; a 'tips' sheet for new and existing staff has been the basis for discussion.

Developing empathy is an important attribute in working with our students; it enhances communicative processes and facilitates the building of relationship. The poetic stanzas offered within this study provide a lens through which to (re-) appraise the student experience and could be used to work with staff to enhance empathy, experiencing the lifeworld through the words of the student; similar use of narrative research to inform professionals of clients' perspectives has been employed in other disciplines (Clark and Mishler, 1992; Riessman and Quinney, 2005). For example, role play/ discussion activities based on the poetic stanzas could be created as part of staff development opportunities to offer insights into the students' perspective. In similar vein, the entailments offer scope to sensitise



staff to the nuanced understandings of belonging, and so develop empathic ways of working.

This study offers a nuanced understanding of 'belonging' based on 'being held' and 'breaking free'. I have added to the Induction programme for students within my department by developing a one-day programme that takes account of affective dimensions to do with 'being held' and 'breaking free'; opportunities for relationship-building, choice, and risk-taking are incorporated into the day's events. Evaluative induction student blogs have affirmed the effectiveness of such activities as contributing to students' sense of feeling settled in new surrounds.

The theoretical framing of this study within ecological systems thinking has highlighted the connectedness of 'parts' within a system. All aspects of the lives of our students have the potential to impact the teaching-learning process and it is recognition of such aspects that can acknowledge and value what students bring to the 'table'; a positive framing of students' backgrounds affords us the chance to connect with and build upon them, foregrounding an asset-based approach (Kinney, 2015). Similarly, all aspects of the lifeworld of the university, inclusive of people and practices, impact the teaching-learning process so that experiences both within and beyond the classroom need to reflect respectful working and affirm the potentiality of the student (Rogers, 1990).

I have offered the concept of 'dispersed belonging' whereby creating a multiplicity of 'niches' can afford the opportunity for staff and students to build trust and

recognition, so valuing the qualities of interdependence and diversity that are inherent within an ecological understanding. For example, the spatial configuration of architectural design is important to provide 'physical niches' where students and/or staff can meet in an informal manner; to feel 'held' and so build capacity for risk-taking, growth and development.

The role of the personal tutor, often working on a one-to-one basis, can offer 'affective niches' wherein the student becomes known to the tutor, s/he is noticed and accepted. Going beyond the academic interest in the student, the personal tutor might enquire: 'how are you?' so valuing the student as 'whole person'. The entailments within this study could assist in uncovering how students are feeling/ experiencing their time at university since the role of the personal tutor is well-placed to explore such structural understandings to know the student better.

The classroom may offer, for some, the only place of contact with peers. The creation of 'intellectual niches' in the learning spaces is crucial to 'hold' the emotional states of students, especially when encountering concepts and practices that may be unfamiliar. Students' anxieties can present as resistance to learning and can negatively influence peer working. There is a need to notice all students, to work respectfully with whatever contributions might be made, and to gently challenge views offered; 'being held' can offer the potential for 'breaking free'. The freedom for students to think creatively and to 'insert themselves' into the learning may require them to negotiate curriculum content, ways of working, and means of

assessment; for staff, this may offer new ways of working that will also require the ability to 'break free'.

This study has employed methodological strategies that have led to an in-depth elicitation of narrators' perspectives, so adding to the contribution of the student voice on the topic of engagement and belonging; such detailed accounts may not have been achieved via more traditional qualitative research methods. Creative methods were combined with a narrative inquiry methodology, using a person-centred approach, which enabled narrators to speak at length and to be innovative in their storying of lived experience. Pictorial and figurative understandings were employed to facilitate discussion around intangible concepts that may not previously have been considered. Such research strategies might usefully be developed for use both within the support mechanism of the personal tutor and the teaching-learning process.

I have incorporated the use of photos/ images and metaphor into my teaching-learning strategies: inviting students to bring photos/ images reflecting their understandings of an abstract concept has facilitated in-depth discussion and encouraged affect through greater involvement in the teaching-learning process; metaphors found within literature have been 'unpacked' to reflect figurative ways of understanding, to encompass diversity of meanings, and to explore conceptual structurings of abstract concepts. Such strategies have the potential to enhance inclusivity of the teaching-learning process by offering a means to 'enter into' the topic in a range of ways that are relevant to the student body, that encourage the

affective domain by an awareness that it is not so much the topic under discussion that is important but “our relation to it” (Dillon, 1994,p. 32), and that promote our students’ ability to engage in dialogic activity. Facilitating student talk in the classroom, and beyond, helps to create a collective sense of belonging, with peers, with staff, and with the academic endeavour; moving from the position of ‘I’ to a new sense of ‘we’ as students coalesce around a new experience (Young, 1990).

And finally, this study emphasises the complexity of relationships and the need for us to know our students well in order that we can build on their strengths to work towards academic success. Such a view affirms the qualities inherent within an equality and diversity policy context whereby persons are held to be worthy and respectful working is deemed the means to unlock the potentiality of the individual (Rogers, 1990).

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

#### Participant Information Sheet

**Project Title:** Storying students' ecologies of belonging: a participatory research study of the interface between 'first generation' students and the university

You are invited to take part in my doctoral research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

#### What is the purpose of the project?

The general topic of the project is student engagement within Higher Education. The Widening Participation agenda has recently sought to encourage a broad range of students into the university and issues of retention, progression and achievement are highly prized by universities. Many strategies are used to 'engage' students in their studies so that learning outcomes are enhanced. I wish to consider the lives of students in the 'here and now' and explore to what extent the life of the student impacts on their engagement with the university. I am particularly interested in the topic of 'belonging' and how you might experience it, and how you might talk about it.

#### Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to take part in the study as a research participant as you are a second year undergraduate student within the Faculty of Education, Health and Well-Being. I wish to include the voices of a range of students within my final study; your background will contribute to a range of student voices being included within this study.

#### Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. Refusal to take part will involve no penalty at all. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time, without penalty and without giving a reason.

#### What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to meet with me three times before the beginning of the next academic year ie before September 2016; each meeting may last up to one hour and we can negotiate which dates, times and venues might be suitable to you. I would like to talk with you about your experiences of being a part of the university; how your life impacts on your engagement with the university and how university impacts on your life outside of the University. I shall also ask if you are willing to complete a piece of written/visual work in between our first two meetings so that it can form the basis of our second conversation. In preparation

for our third meeting, I shall ask you to take some photographs that we can talk about.

### **What do I have to do? And what are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

You will be asked to take part in conversations with me to share your experiences that are individual to you. In relation to the written/visual work I will ask you to talk it through so that we can use it as a basis for further discussion. I shall ask to digitally record our conversations so that I can return to them many times to gain an accurate description of what we have spoken about. I would also like the opportunity to share with you, at a later date (during Oct-Nov 2016), what I have understood from our conversations. It may be that you feel uncomfortable in talking with me about your experiences at the university and aspects of your life outside of the university. I shall endeavour to work respectfully with you to assure you that I value your contributions and that the project seeks to put the voice of students at the foreground of the debate around student engagement, and in particular in relation to student 'belonging'.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

While you may not feel there are immediate benefits to being involved in this project, I would hope that it may serve to give you some experience of the research process; you have studied research methods as a module this year and next academic year you will be required to undertake a small-scale research project of your own. My study is a participatory piece of research; as such, I invite you to contribute to the evidence I shall be gathering by means of conversation, aided by visual materials that you will have provided. I also invite you to assist in the interpretation of the evidence gathered in order that an authentic student 'voice' can be included.

### **What happens when the research study stops?**

You are invited to take part in my doctoral research study which will lead to my producing a final thesis. I shall have to defend my thesis in a doctoral 'viva' with two academics drawn from outside of the University of Wolverhampton. Once completed, the thesis will be published online and stored electronically for others to access.

### **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is shared with others will have your name removed to minimise the possibility of your being recognised.

### **Who is organising the research?**

This project is being undertaken as part of my doctoral programme at the University of Wolverhampton. The programme is the Professional Doctorate, EdD. The study for the project has been approved by the Education Ethics Committee of the University of Wolverhampton.

### **Contact for further information**

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me at:

[lynnrichards@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:lynnrichards@wlv.ac.uk) or on 01902-323379. Alternatively you may wish to contact my Director of Studies, Dr Linda Devlin at [L.Devlin@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:L.Devlin@wlv.ac.uk) who will be happy to clarify any aspects of the study.

**If you choose to take part in this research project I would like to thank you, in advance, for your contribution in giving your personal views and opinions.**

**You are invited to keep a copy of this Participant Information Sheet for your personal reference and, if you choose to take part, you will be asked to sign two copies of a Participant Consent Form - one for the research project and one for yourself.**

4 April 2016



Appendix 2:

<b>Title of Project:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Storying students' ecologies of belonging: a participatory research study of the interface between 'first generation' students and the university		
<b>Name of Researcher: Lynn Richards</b>		
		<b>Please initial</b>
<b>box</b>		
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated <i>4 April 2016</i> for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.		<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.		<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis.		<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I agree to take part in the above project.		<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	_____	
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	
Researcher	Date	Signature
Copies:		
One copy for the participant and one copy for the researcher		

